



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# OFFICIAL REPORT

## (Hansard)

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



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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 9 March 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## MATTERS OF THE DAY

### **Dissident Republican Attack at Massereene Army Base, Antrim**

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party — indeed, from the leaders of all the main parties — seeking leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call the Rt Hon Peter Robinson to speak first on the subject, and I will then call the leaders of each of the other parties in order. There will be no opportunity for interventions, questions or for a vote on the matter, and I will take no points of order until this issue is dealt with. In addition, because of the serious nature of events over the weekend, there will be no time limit on the speeches of party leaders.

**Mr P Robinson:** A dark shadow hangs over our proceedings today. On Saturday evening, while in the rest of Northern Ireland people were getting on with their lives, evil men, claiming to represent the Real IRA, brutally murdered two young men and tried to kill many others. In doing so, they threw down a challenge to us all. It is a challenge to not just this Assembly and its Executive, but to those whom we collectively represent.

The two murdered soldiers were only 21 and 23 years of age. They were callously gunned down just hours before they were due to leave Northern Ireland to serve in Afghanistan. They were off duty and unarmed, and were shot as they went to collect a pizza at the gates of the Massereene Army base. Two other soldiers were injured in the horrific attack, and the same gunmen then cold-bloodedly turned their weapons on the civilian pizza delivery men.

I know that the Assembly extends its condolences to the sorrowing families, and prays that the Lord comfort them at this most tragic time. One of the injured civilians is a local man, 19-year-old Anthony Watson. The other is a young man from Poland, who came here in search

of a better life. Today, we prayerfully uphold all those innocent victims of that terrorist attack. No words of ours can ease the pain and devastation that has been brought to those families. However, as First Minister, and as leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, I want, on behalf of all those for whom I speak, to offer deepest sympathy for the loss that has been suffered.

There is no cause that can justify those actions. No goal will be achieved. The killers will not win.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr P Robinson:** It was a futile act and a terrible waste. The contrast between those brave soldiers and the wicked murderers could not be more stark. The soldiers who fell at the Massereene base will be remembered with honour and with pride. Their killers will live with the shame, and they and their cause will be thought of with contempt and loathing.

Today, and in the time ahead, we have a decision to make as a community. The choice is clear and will determine our future as a people. At the weekend, we saw in bold and terrible relief a glimpse of what we had left behind. It was an act intended to divide us. It was calculated as a means to raise fear and hatred, and planned to cause us to stumble. It was designed to force us to turn back.

It is certainly not a time to raise the flag of party politics. It is a time for every corner of the House, and of our community, to unite in condemnation, and to resolve that those people will never win and that we will not be diverted from the course that we have set. What we have here is far from perfect. What we have here is often difficult to operate. Many differences between our traditions remain. However, it is here in the Assembly that we will work to resolve our problems.

The events of Saturday evening were a throwback to a previous era. We must never return to such terrible days. As a people, we can defeat the murder gangs by refusing to be dragged back to the bad and bloody days of the past. In the face of the tragedy that Saturday's events have brought, silence and disengagement are not options. If we want to rid our society of violence and division, the struggle for all of us continues every day.

We offer the Chief Constable, and those who serve with him, the support that they require and deserve in order to do their jobs and to bring the killers to justice. However, the responsibility to bring those people to justice does not fall to the PSNI alone. It is a duty that is placed on all of us. The police can be effective only with the entire community's support and co-operation.

The continued existence of this institution will be evidence of the failure of the campaign of murder. However, this institution exists only with the consent and support of the community. Today we are being tested. However, we should remember that our future

is not dependent on the evil of those who seek to destroy our society. Rather, it depends on the good that is found in those people, throughout our community, who want to build a stable, peaceful, democratic and shared society. It is a moment of truth for us all. We all have a choice to make.

On Saturday night, the challenge was issued. Today, in the House and outside of it, let the answer be loud and clear: we are not turning back.

**Mr Adams:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I stand here as an unrepentant and unapologetic Irish republican. I want to see an end to British rule on this island, and I want to see the unity of orange and green. That can only be achieved by peaceful and democratic means, and Sinn Féin is wedded to that. I know that other Members are unapologetic, unrepentant unionists and that they want to see the retention of the Union, but here we are as republicans and unionists, united in an effort to make politics work, to set aside divisions and differences and, in an ongoing process, to build peace based on equality.

Many of us from all sides in the Assembly have lost loved ones and friends over decades of conflict, and we know only too well the pain and grief that accompanies such events. Some of us have been targets in the past, and some of us are still targets, so we understand grief, loss and violent bereavement. I want to extend my sympathies, and the sympathies of Sinn Féin, to the families of those who were killed and injured on Saturday night. The Assembly is united in that solidarity, and I join with the First Minister in his condolences to the bereaved families. I underpin his commitment that the Assembly is resolved to work through our difficulties. There is, as he said, no turning back.

Saturday night's attack was a deliberate and calculated attack on the peace process. It was wrong — let there be no ambiguity about that. The perpetrators want to destroy the hard-won progress of recent years.

Tá mé fíor-chinnte gur ionsaí ar an phróiseas síochána a bhí san ionsaí sin, agus gníomh mícheart a bhí ann. Tá mé cinnte fosta, a Cheann Comhairle, nach bhfuil aon tacaíocht ón phobal ag an dream a rinne é agus nach bhfuil aon straitéis ar aghaidh ná straitéis aontaithe acu.

Let us also be very clear that those who perpetrated this attack and who, perhaps, have set their sights on other actions do not have any support in broad republicanism or nationalism. The progress made for the people of this island and the people of the North cannot be surrendered. There is a huge onus on us not only to talk or to engage in the genuine remarks that have been made about the attack but we need, by action, to make politics work. There is also an onus on the British Government and the PSNI to resist any temptation, and for others to resist any temptation, for

a return to the bad practices of the past or to sideline the peace process or the political leaders. That means, in particular, that the transparency and accountability arrangements around the PSNI must be adhered to and actively promoted.

Sinn Féin does support, and Sinn Féin will support, the police in the apprehension of those involved in Saturday night's killings. We have a responsibility to defend the peace and these institutions, and to oppose the actions of those who would attack or seek to undermine them.

I believe that all of us, collectively, have successfully constructed a political strategy and a way forward to deal with the issues that are pressing down on our people. It is not a perfect process; everyone here has difficulties with some dimension of what we have achieved. However, there is a widespread common view that there can be no excuse or justification for incidents such as the one that we have just seen.

*12.15 pm*

Sinn Féin will, not just here and in the media, but in the communities that it represents, go toe to toe with those who would try to drag the people of the island, particularly the North, back into conflict. The popular will is for peaceful political change; the popular will is for democratic change. It is our responsibility to deliver for all the people whom we represent.

I appeal particularly to republicans. I reiterate my certain view — and the deputy First Minister made the same point — that there can be no ambiguity about the incident. It is time for calm and thoughtful, but decisive, leadership. The peace process was built against the odds. It will endure. That is our responsibility. We will not be deflected from peaceful pursuance of our republican and democratic objectives. However, never will we stand back from combating, contesting and resisting the people who want to bring us all back to the past that we have left behind. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Sir Reg Empey:** This is a day that Northern Ireland should never again have seen. The fact that the Assembly meets to condemn the murder of two soldiers and the injury of four other persons is a painful reminder of the dark years that we had hoped would never revisit society.

On Saturday 7 March 2009, evil terrorists murdered two young soldiers. To their families and to those of the people who were wounded, Members on these Benches offer their condolences and sympathies, inadequate though that is. Now, and in the days to come, I trust that the families who mourn, grieve and suffer will know that the people of Northern Ireland respect and honour the sacrifice that was made by those young men.

Those of us who are in positions of political responsibility have a solemn obligation to ensure that

our words that condemn that act of terror and that express our support for the forces of law and order contain no ambiguity or equivocation. It is a matter of regret to me and my colleagues that the initial response from the honourable Member for West Belfast did not contain that clarity. Initially, there was ambiguity. Although the response has been added to in subsequent statements by others, I believe that that lack of clarity at the initial stage, nevertheless, undermines confidence that the Assembly is collectively capable of resisting the activities of the people who carried out those attacks on Saturday.

However, condemnation is not enough; there must be active support for the police and the rule of law. That means calling explicitly for all sections of the community to co-operate with the PSNI in pursuing the people who committed those murders on Saturday. For the Executive and the Assembly to be truly united in their response to Saturday's murders, all parties must be unambiguous in their condemnation of that act of terrorism and be explicit in their co-operation with the PSNI in its determination to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Given the nature of the attack — the ruthless manner in which it was carried out — it amounted to nothing less than an execution. It did not give me or my colleagues the belief that it was carried out by mere amateurs who have little experience. I trust that the honourable Member for West Belfast and his colleagues in the republican movement will search their memories to see whether they or anyone whom they know would have knowledge of the type of people who are capable of carrying out that act. I hope that that message gets through to the wider republican movement.

Those people did not carry out that act in isolation: there had to be support, arms dumps, training, surveillance, and all the paraphernalia that goes into a terrorist attack.

This act did not happen in five minutes; it was pre-planned, deliberate, wilful and evil. Clearly, a large number of people must have knowledge of, and involvement in, that process. Therefore, it seems that in order to signify a starting point, those in the republican movement who have knowledge of who could be involved in such a process, should, without let or hindrance, pass that information to the security forces.

I know that such an approach goes against the grain that has been established over many years. However, if we are to move to the new beginning to which we all ascribe, this test — as the First Minister indicated — is an opportunity for all of us to prove that we really have moved on and that we have put the past behind us.

The Assembly is a political institution, and its purpose is to provide political leadership and direction

to our society. In the aftermath of Saturday's brutal events, it is now clearer than ever that the devolution of policing and justice at this stage would, in our view, threaten political stability and the proper operation of policing and the rule of law in Northern Ireland.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Sir Reg Empey:** Sir Hugh Orde must receive any additional resources that he needs to pursue and prevent terrorists. However, given the stresses and strains that were evident last week, I am not convinced that the House has reached the level of maturity that is necessary to handle such sensitive matters. Given that the Executive were inactive for five of the previous 12 months and have not dealt with many basic bread-and-butter issues, such as education, the doubt that hangs over the transfer of policing and justice — a process that is, largely, shrouded in secrecy — should be brought to an end.

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister should state clearly that they do not intend to pursue the devolution of policing and justice at this stage. We need to decide collectively how we will handle that matter. What are the full implications? Is the House mature enough to handle the ensuing operational responsibilities? Can we support the Chief Constable? Do we understand and fully accept that we must progress through actions that we all support? The House must think long and hard about that matter.

We must warn about another danger. There may be elements in loyalism that see an opportunity for retaliation. On behalf of my colleagues, I want to make it clear that we strongly urge anybody who is contemplating such action to desist without delay. Retaliatory action will have no benefit. The House will agree that none of us wants to see more families at a graveside or at a hospital bed. Any elements who are contemplating retaliation should look at what the country has gone through in the past. Nobody wants to return to that situation, and such actions would propel us in that direction. The people who carried out Saturday's act would welcome and benefit from such an approach.

In the days to come, we must reflect further on the implications of Saturday's events. However, today, our primary thoughts and prayers are with the families of the two young soldiers who were brutally murdered and those who were injured. The solidarity shown by the people of Antrim has sent a positive message and signal to the rest of Northern Ireland, and their elected representatives in the council will, undoubtedly, express that opinion later this week. We all should follow their example. We should support them and hope and pray that the sacrifices that were made on Saturday will not be forgotten. The loss borne by the families always elicits our deepest sympathies.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Durkan:** I join other party leaders in, sadly, offering sincere condolences to the families of the two murdered soldiers. Those families were conscious that their sons were going to Afghanistan and, subsequently, received the awful news — which must have caused total shock and disbelief — that their sons had been killed in Northern Ireland.

We are very conscious, too, of those who were injured — people from here and a young man from Poland who is living here with his partner and child. Our thoughts go to all those families, and to the Polish community in Northern Ireland, which makes a very positive contribution and must be in utter shock at what has happened.

There is shock right across the community, but also a very real anger, and it is right that we express that in a proper, constructive and, as far as possible, united way. Party leaders have, I believe, tried to do that this morning.

In this day and age, given all that we have agreed and the process in which we are involved, the presence of a place such as Massereene barracks is not an affront to the people of Ireland. The attack on Massereene barracks is an affront to the people of Ireland. Those who did it are steeped in the mindset and methods that gave us so much violence in the past, and the chilling language of legitimate targets and collaborators. Although they may be steeped there, they must not be allowed to plunge the rest of us back into that ugliness, and all the suffering and sterility that goes with it.

We need to be sure that those who set out to murder on Saturday night do not succeed in their goal, which is to subvert the democratic arrangements in which we are involved here and elsewhere, and to subvert the new beginning to policing and all that that is helping to underpin. We have to send out a strong and united message from the Chamber, and through all other democratic means at our disposal, that although that group may have been able to cut down two young men, it will not cut down political stability and the peace that it reinforces. It may have been able to gravely wound other young people, but it must not be able to injure the integrity of the new beginning to policing, which has helped to ensure the unity of the democratic response that we have witnessed to this atrocity.

Although the atrocity of the weekend has not in itself plumbed new depths, because of the nature of the violence and the language that was used to justify it, we have, perhaps, seen at least some new heights of political consensus and democratic determination in trying to face down those who would use that violence.

We have to send out the clear message that if anyone out there, in any quarter, has information that could be used to apprehend those responsible or to

prevent further murders and atrocities by them, it is their bounden duty — as citizens, as Irish citizens, as democrats — to give that information to the police so that they can act in all our interests and on behalf of us all for the good of peace and for the name of Ireland.

We need to be clear, strong and united. Yes, there will be political differences and difficulties on issues such as devolution of justice and policing and other things, but now is not the time to be setting tests for one party or another, and trying to set party against party. Now is the time to show a determined, democratic resolve on behalf of all the people who have given us their mandate.

We have to make sure that no difficulty and no difference is exploited by those behind that atrocity, or by others who would emulate them or take it upon themselves to retaliate. We must unite in a determined way to make it very clear that they will get no profit for their agenda from what they did, and they will find no comfort from their subversion. They will not be allowed to set the agenda for here or elsewhere.

I regret — as, I am sure, do others — that circumstances forced the First Minister and deputy First Minister to postpone their trip to the United States, with all that that was meant to represent and to promote. I am glad that that trip is to go forward soon, and I hope that that, too, will be an expression of the determination of everyone in the Chamber to go forward to seize and shape a positive future, and not to sink back to a negative past.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

*12.30 pm*

**Mr Ford:** On behalf of my party in the Assembly and in the wider community, I have words this morning of sympathy, condemnation and solidarity. Our first words must be of sympathy for the families of Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar, the two young sappers who were killed on Saturday night. Those two young men were doing their duty and serving this community before they proceeded to do their duty in Afghanistan in uniform. Our sympathy goes out to their families, friends and comrades, some of whom were still in Antrim while others were already in Afghanistan, and in particular, to their two wounded comrades, who are being treated in hospital here.

We all knew the dangers that they would face when they got to Afghanistan; few of us could have thought that there was such a danger in ordering a pizza on a Saturday night in the United Kingdom. Added to that, we must have sympathy for the two local men who were earning an honest living by delivering those pizzas. One of them is from an Antrim family; the other established a home here because he wanted to better himself and his family. Our thoughts and prayers are with them, and with those in the emergency

services who looked after them on Saturday night, and the staff of Antrim Area Hospital, who continue to care for them and continue to seek to preserve life today.

It is right that all of us in this place condemn this atrocity, regardless of our background or our perception of the way things are. I cannot understand how any evil minds could have thought that the murders that were carried out on Saturday night could serve any cause or could produce anything but sorrow and suffering for the families concerned.

The two soldiers who died were both at primary school when we started on the process that led to agreement on Good Friday in 1998 and to the establishment of this Assembly. Last year, 38 Engineer Regiment was honoured with the freedom of the borough of Antrim because of the work that its members had done in helping the local community. That is a measure of who they were, where they came from and what they had done for society. It was a sign of how much this community has moved on in the past decade. We must make it absolutely clear from this Chamber today that we will not allow ourselves to be dragged back; that whatever the difficulties, we will continue to ensure that the process works.

I do not believe that there was ever such a thing as a legitimate target. However, the horror of the assault on Saturday night, and the way in which it was perpetrated, not just on those who wore uniforms, but on the civilians who were serving the local community in Antrim, adds a perverted twist to any of that kind of logic. It is important that we stand here in solidarity together in order to show that politics works, and let people know that whatever death and suffering may be inflicted on society, there will be no going back on the concept of a process that is bringing people together.

It is no secret that I am not the greatest fan of the way in which the Executive have worked. However, let us be absolutely clear that we are showing the way forward, whatever faltering steps we take or whatever criticisms I may have about the detail. This Assembly is giving the way forward for the people of Northern Ireland, and it must continue to do so; even more so in the face of what we had to put up with.

I have a different take on things from the other four party leaders who have spoken because I have lived in Antrim all my adult life. I have had the honour of representing Antrim people since 1993. I now face the prospect, because of the way that we so often refer to events by place names, that when people talk about Antrim in future, they will think of Saturday night. However, that was not Antrim; Antrim was Sunday lunchtime. Antrim was the people of the town standing in simple and quiet dignity as an expression of sympathy to the soldiers who had lost their lives and to their comrades, and as an expression of solidarity as

they stood together. That was the message that we should take from the weekend.

When Father Tony Devlin, who has provided huge leadership to our community, led his parishioners across the road and stood at the tape, he gave a clear statement:

“You do not act in our name.”

When people from the Church of Ireland, the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches joined them, they said: we stand together. Whatever you throw at us, we stand together. That message, which was an Antrim message yesterday, must be an Assembly message today.

I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the comments that they made and the leadership that they gave yesterday. I do not share their backgrounds, and I would not have used exactly the same words that they used, but they spoke — although separately — together for us all. We have to move that process forward. We have to ensure in this place that we make politics work. We have to show the tiny minority that politics can work. Indeed, we have to show the world — in the face of that atrocity — that politics does work.

Talking to my colleagues this morning, we recalled the dreadful deaths in Poyntzpass in March 1998 of Damien Trainor and Philip Allen. That was a terrible tragedy for those two families, and yet, somehow, they provided a catalyst to ensure that people came together and built something better. I hope and pray that the lesson of Saturday night at Massereene barracks gates is one that we can all take forward, and I pledge my colleagues and myself to that end.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Ms Purvis:** As events were taking place over the weekend for International Women’s Day, on Saturday night, two mothers lost their sons. Wives, sisters, daughters, fathers and brothers are all suffering anguish at the minute, and I send my thoughts, and those of my party, to those families and those mothers who have lost their sons and to those families that wait at the bedside of those who are injured.

The message that we send out today, from all sides of the House, is one of unity — united in our condemnation of that terrible, despicable act, that attack on our political process, our peace process and our community. We are united in that condemnation. We are also united in our determination to ensure that all the political progress that has been made so far — however one wants to describe it — will continue. We must continue to make progress and move forward.

We are all united in our support for the Police Service of Northern Ireland in order for it to do its job. We are united in our call for assistance from all sections of the community in order that the police can

arrest those responsible and take them off the streets. I make a particular appeal to the mothers, wives, daughters and sisters of those who carried out that attack. I say to them: search your hearts and your consciences, and ask yourselves what type of society you want to live in. Do you want to take us back to the dark days? Do you want to see mothers and sisters mourning at graves? Search your souls and give those people up.

Nothing should distract the police from directing their full focus on catching those criminals, because that is what they are — criminals. They are a small, criminal gang that has no mandate. They have a warped sense of struggle or cause, but they are criminals. They are kidnappers, bank robbers, fuel smugglers and launderers, extortionists and murderers — they are criminals. I appeal to those who are thinking of retaliation in any form to listen to the united response of our community and politicians. We do not want any retaliation for that attack. Do not respond to those criminals, because that is what they are. Do not give them any credibility, and do not legitimise their actions.

Help the police to bring them to court. Help the police to take them off the streets. Do not distract the police from doing their job. We are united in the House today, and we must go forward united in sending, loudly and clearly, the message that we are moving forward and will continue to move forward.

**Mr B Wilson:** On behalf of my party, I join Members in condemning the murder of the two soldiers on Saturday night. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those killed and injured, and I pray that the injured men make a speedy recovery.

Our priority must be to ensure that the police are given the necessary resources to enable them to bring the perpetrators of the atrocity to justice. However, we must remember that the aim of those who carried out the atrocity is to bring down the Assembly and take us backwards into a spiral of violence. Therefore, it is important that we, as the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, stand together at this time and present a united front. We must not give any comfort to the murderers. I welcome the fact that all the party leaders have united in condemning those appalling murders.

Therefore, it is important that we unite and show no divisions. It is also important that we use considered language, because disputes can give only succour to those who carried out the attack, and those people have no support or mandate to commit such atrocities. The Assembly must stand firm and provide leadership to ensure that we succeed in building a united community and are not dragged back to the violence of the past.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Budget Bill

### Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** I wish to inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law on 6 March 2009.

I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we move on to the next item of business.

## Presumption of Death Bill

### Consideration Stage

**Mr Speaker:** Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in my provisional grouping of amendments selected list.

There are three groups of amendments, and we will debate the amendments in each group in turn. The first debate will be on amendment Nos 1, 2, 5, 8 and 9, which deal with the standing of those entitled to make applications to the High Court; a discretionary power for the High Court to compel disclosure of information from someone who is not a party to proceedings; and commencement arrangements to enable the rules of court to be made quickly.

The second debate will be on amendment Nos 3, 4, 6 and 7. Those amendments deal with annuities and other periodical payments paid as a result of a declaration of presumed death, and they will reduce the requirement for insurance on the part of recipients of such payments. They further deal with amending the definition of “insurer”.

12.45 pm

The third debate will be on amendment No 10, which deals with changing, from a discretionary power to a statutory duty, the role of the Registrar General in annotating the register where it emerges that a death certificate has been issued outside Northern Ireland.

I remind Members who are intending to speak that, during the debates on the three groups of amendments, they should address all the amendments in each particular group on which they wish to comment. Once the initial debate on each group is completed, any subsequent amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

#### *Clause 1 (Declarations of presumed death)*

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the first group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2, 5, 8 and 9. Those deal with the standing of those entitled to make applications to the High Court; a discretionary power for the High Court to compel disclosure of information; and commencement arrangements to enable the rules of court to be made quickly.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds):** I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 1, line 17, at end insert

“or

(c) the applicant is a close relative of the missing person where the missing person is a victim of violence (within the meaning of section 1(4) of the Northern Ireland (Location of Victims’ Remains) Act 1999).”

*The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:*

No 2: In page 2, line 4, leave out “subsection” and insert “subsections (2)(c) and”. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]*

No 5: After clause 10, insert the following new clause:

“Disclosure of information

10A.—(1) Where the High Court is of the opinion that it is necessary for the purpose of disposing of proceedings under section 1 or section 5, the Court may, of its own motion or on the application of a party to the proceedings, make an order requiring any person who is not a party to the proceedings to disclose to the Court such information as the Court considers relevant to the determination of the question of whether a missing person is alive or dead as may be specified in the order.

(2) Nothing in subsection (1) shall impose a duty to disclose information—

- (a) which is permitted or required by any rule of law to be withheld on grounds of public interest immunity;
- (b) which any person would be entitled to refuse to provide on grounds of legal professional privilege;
- (c) if the disclosure of that information might incriminate the person disclosing the information, or his or her spouse or civil partner, of an offence.

(3) Before making an order under subsection (1), the High Court must serve notice of its intention to make the order on any person who, in the opinion of the Court, is likely to be affected by the order.

(4) The High Court may discharge or vary an order made by it under this section on an application made to the Court by any person affected by the order.

(5) Rules of court may make provision as to the practice and procedure to be followed in connection with proceedings relating to orders under this section.

(6) This section binds the Crown to the full extent authorised or permitted by the constitutional laws of Northern Ireland.” — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]*

No 8: In clause 19, page 9, line 10, at end insert “( ) section 9(1);”. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]*

No 9: In clause 19, page 9, line 10, at end insert “( ) section 10A(5);”. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]*

In explaining amendment No 1, I will also deal with amendment Nos 2, 5, 8 and 9, which have been grouped. Amendment No 1 adds a third jurisdictional rule to clause 1. At present, the Bill provides that the High Court has jurisdiction to hear a case in which either the missing person, or an applicant’s spouse or civil partner, satisfies certain domicile or habitual residence requirements. During both public consultation and scrutiny at Committee Stage, some families of the

disappeared requested that my officials consider an amendment to the Bill to make explicit that the High Court will have jurisdiction to hear applications brought by family members of the disappeared, without their necessarily having to satisfy the normal domicile or habitual residence tests.

Amendment No 1, therefore, provides that the High Court will have jurisdiction to hear a case in which:

“the applicant is a close relative of the missing person where the missing person is a victim of violence (within the meaning of section 1(4) of the Northern Ireland (Location of Victims’ Remains) Act 1999.”

Reference to the statutory remit of the Independent Commission on the Location of Victims’ Remains is simply a technical way of referring to the disappeared.

Amendment No 2 is a consequential amendment to the new jurisdictional rule dealt with in amendment No 1. It ensures that the definition of “close relative” in clause 1(4) covers the reference to close relative in the new jurisdictional rule, as well as in clause 1(3).

Amendment No 5 inserts a new clause after clause 10. During the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill, I gave notice that officials were working with departmental colleagues across Great Britain and Northern Ireland and legislative counsel to draw up a new clause dealing with the disclosure of information. The new clause allows the High Court to order a person who is not a party to the proceedings to disclose relevant information to the court. In that context, the information sought must be relevant to the determination of the question of whether the person is alive or dead. The High Court will be able to exercise that power if asked to do so by a party to the proceedings, or if it considers that obtaining such information is necessary, even though no party to the proceedings has sought a disclosure order.

Subsection 2 of the new clause sets out the grounds on which information may be withheld from the court. First, the withholding of information is permitted or required on the grounds of public interest immunity. Secondly, the person holding the information is entitled to refuse to provide it on the grounds of legal professional privilege. Thirdly, information may be withheld if it might incriminate the person disclosing it, or his or her spouse or civil partner, of an offence.

Those three grounds for non-disclosure are similar to those available in proceedings under the corresponding Scottish legislation, and they are common in other civil contexts in which a court has the power to order a third party to disclose information.

Subsection 3 of the new clause provides that, before making an order, the High Court must serve notice of its intention to do so on any person who might be affected by that order. If an order is made, subsection 4 provides that a person affected by an order may apply

to the High Court to have the order discharged or varied. I do not expect that the court will use the new disclosure provision often. Rather, I expect that in the majority of cases, the affidavit evidence presented by the applicant, in addition to any other supporting documentation, would provide the court with sufficient information on which to decide whether the grounds for making a declaration of presumed death, or a variation under clause 5, were satisfied.

During the Committee Stage of the Bill, there was some suggestion that certain agencies should be under an obligation or duty to disclose information held by them about a missing person to the High Court. Our view is that imposing a general duty on third parties to disclose information would be disproportionate and might well result in a large volume of information being produced that offers the High Court little or no assistance in deciding the issue that is before it.

The purpose of proceedings under the Presumption of Death Bill is not to reopen the investigation into the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of any particular individual, nor to determine who may be responsible for, or have knowledge of, the disappearance. In these proceedings, the role of the High Court is to decide whether, on the evidence before it, the court ought to make the declaration of presumed death, either on the grounds that the missing person is thought to have died, or that the person has not been known to be alive for a period of at least seven years.

Amendment Nos 8 and 9 are technical amendments to clause 19 of the Bill, dealing with commencement. These amendments identify additional provisions of the Bill, which will come into operation one month after the date on which the Bill receives Royal Assent.

Amendment No 8 provides that the rule-making provisions of clause 9(1) shall come into force without the need for a formal commencement by my Department. Clause 9 of the Bill sets out the role that the Attorney General for Northern Ireland has in relation to proceedings under the Bill, and provides that the Attorney General shall receive papers and the right to intervene in proceedings and argue questions before the High Court. Clause 9(1) provides that rules of court must set out the procedure that enables the Attorney to receive notices of applications made under the Bill for a declaration of a variation order.

Amendment No 9 provides that the new rule-making provision in subsection 5 of the new disclosure clause will also come into operation one month after receipt of Royal Assent. These amendments, together with some of the other provisions of clause 19, will allow the necessary rules of court to be drafted and approved by the Supreme Court rules committee in

time for the commencement of the substantive provisions of the Bill later this year.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his introductory remarks.

In addressing this group of amendments, I will refer briefly to the Committee Stage of the Bill and the Committee's work in that regard. As part of its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee received written and oral evidence from the WAVE Trauma Centre, representing some of the families of the disappeared. It also received written evidence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The Committee also received an acknowledgement of support for the provisions of the Bill from Lisburn City Council.

A range of issues and concerns was identified by witnesses and by the Committee arising from the evidence. Those were subsequently raised with the Department of Finance and Personnel. The key issues included concerns around the scope of the jurisdictional rules that require domicile or habitual residence in this region, including whether these rules could potentially exclude consideration of the cases of some of the disappeared, and whether that would disadvantage a cohabitant of a missing person in the determination of an application.

Assurances were sought from the Department on the need to periodically review the seven-year absence requirement. Clarification was sought on the treatment of annuities and other periodical payments in relation to reducing the number of instances when insurance may be required under the legislation. Clarification was also sought on whether there will be sufficient provision to ensure privacy of proceedings and the protection of sensitive information. Careful consideration was also given to the disclosure of information and to provision of how a death may be re-registered.

At a later date in the legislative process, I shall detail the issues set out in the Committee's report of the Bill, including the various commitments relating to policy and administrative issues that have been given by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in addressing the Committee's concerns.

I want to put on record the Committee's gratitude to the WAVE Trauma Centre, the family representatives of the disappeared, and to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. All have provided valuable evidence.

I also thank the Minister and his officials for their continued co-operation, and for the good working relationship that the Department has maintained with the Committee in progressing the Bill. The Committee recognises that, in general terms, the changes that the Bill will introduce will be welcomed by the public.

In particular, the Committee believes that the Bill will assist in meeting the needs of the families of people who go missing, including the families of the disappeared.

With respect to amendment No 1, the Committee raised with DFP the concerns that were expressed in evidence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the WAVE Trauma Centre about the scope of the jurisdictional rules that require domicile or habitual residency in this jurisdiction. In particular, there were concerns that some of the disappeared might fall outside of the scope of the jurisdictional rules as originally drafted.

In response, departmental officials agreed to put a recommendation to the Minister concerning an additional, third, jurisdictional rule that would give the High Court the power to hear cases in which the applicant is a close relative of a victim of violence, within the meaning of the Northern Ireland (Location of Victims' Remains) Act 1999. The Committee welcomes the Department's willingness to provide an additional jurisdictional rule, which will help to address concerns that some of the disappeared might fall outside the scope of the jurisdictional rules.

Also with respect to clause 1, the seven-year absence requirement was subject to considerable debate, and the Committee called for it to be reviewed periodically in light of relevant international legislative developments. The Department subsequently updated the Committee on the latest assessment of the Council of Europe's working group, which presently favours a seven-year approach. In addition, the Minister referred the Committee to the flexibility afforded by clause 12, which gives the Department the power to vary the seven-year time period in the future.

In conclusion, with respect to clause 1, the Committee is content with amendment No 1 and with the consequential amendment No 2, concerning the additional jurisdictional rule.

Amendment No 5, which provides for a new disclosure of information clause after clause 10, received careful consideration in the Committee following evidence from the WAVE Trauma Centre and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which highlighted the need for robust provision in the Bill to ensure that the High Court will be able to obtain the information necessary to dispose of applications before it.

The Department proposed a new disclosure of information clause, which would provide a discretionary power for the High Court to order someone who is not a party to proceedings to disclose information to the court. DFP provided the Committee with an initial draft clause for consideration and, subsequently, an updated version, which included a new subsection providing that before the High Court makes an order

for disclosure, it shall serve notice of its intention to any person who is likely to be affected by the order.

While the Committee considered the updated version of the new clause, DFP was awaiting responses from Whitehall Departments before finalising the new document. Subsequently, on 19 January, the Department advised the Committee that it had secured the agreement of those Departments to the updated version of the clause.

Although the Committee broadly welcomed the proposed new clause, it deliberated on the inclusion of a duty to disclose information, similar to that contained in section 9 of the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977. The Committee noted that DFP cautioned that such a duty could result, as the Minister said, in the provision of large quantities of information to the court, and that that might place an unnecessary burden on the providers of information and on the court in its consideration of that information. Furthermore, given that the duty of disclosure in Scotland had not actually produced information to the Scottish courts, the Committee noted that the Department considered that a targeted, discretionary power for the High Court would be preferable.

Although the Committee carefully considered the case for including a statutory duty of disclosure on third parties holding information pertinent to the application before the court, it concluded that, on balance, the Department's proposed approach of giving the High Court a discretionary power to order such disclosure was appropriate in the circumstances. The Committee, therefore, welcomes amendment No 5.

I support amendment Nos 1 and 2 to clause 1, amendment No 5, which provides a new disclosure of information clause after clause 10, and amendment Nos 8 and 9 with respect to clause 19, which the Committee agreed with the Department.

**Mr Hamilton:** Given this morning's first item of business concerning the unfortunate killings on Saturday night, which the Secretary of State referred to yesterday as an echo from the past, there is surely something poignant about the fact that we are now discussing a piece of legislation that, ostensibly, deals with the disappeared.

That is one of the most horrific crimes associated with the Troubles, as they were called. Of course, all the murders and deaths of the Troubles were horrific, unwarranted and unnecessary, but there was always a particular issue with those affected by the so-called disappeared. Some families did not have a body to bury, and that, in part, is why this legislation is before the Assembly today.

1.00 pm

I want to speak on amendment Nos 1 and 2 in respect of the jurisdictional rule, and on amendment

No 5, which will create a new clause — clause 10A. As has been said, amendment Nos 1 and 2 stem from discussions with the families of the disappeared. As the Bill stands, where a missing person or an applicant — their spouse or civil partner — satisfies certain domiciliary or habitual residency requirements — the High Court can hear the application. During the Bill's Committee Stage, the families of the disappeared informed the Committee that that would not mean that all their cases could be heard in court.

Members must do everything in their power to make the process as easy as possible for the families of the disappeared. That must be foremost in the minds of Members as they deal with the legislation, given its particular reference to the disappeared. It has not been an easy situation for the families from day one. They did not ask to be put in the situation that they are in. The legislation is attempting to assist them in some small and technical way, and the process should not be made any more difficult than it is already.

I hope that the proposed changes, which were supported by the Committee — and which, I am sure, will be supported by the House — will make it easier for families of the disappeared to apply in those circumstances where the legislation, as drafted, would not make it simple or straightforward. To give the High Court the jurisdiction to hear cases where:

“the applicant is a close relative of the missing person where the missing person is a victim of violence”

should be helpful in that respect.

Amendment No 5 will create new clause 10A in relation to disclosure of information. That was a subject that garnered much discussion within the Committee. As has been said, the new clause will allow the High Court to order a person who is not party to the proceedings to disclose certain relevant information. However, it is worth bearing in mind that that information must be relevant to the determination of a question in respect of the case or information on whether the missing person is alive or dead.

One must remember that the purpose of amendment No 5 and the creation of clause 10A is not to reopen investigations in court. I do not think that the device will have to be used in a great number of cases, but, where it is used, it will be for a specific reason. The purpose is not to reopen investigations or to attribute some level of responsibility to anyone in respect of the horrific circumstances that created the situation.

Amendment No 5 is a proportionate and reasonable amendment. It is in line with similar Scottish legislation, which the Minister mentioned and from which so much of the Bill has been taken. I support the first group of amendments.

**Mr O'Loan:** I support the principles of the Bill, as I said at the Committee Stage. It is good that such a

mechanism should exist and that it will apply in ordinary cases that occur from time to time in which persons, sadly, go missing.

The Bill has particular relevance in relation to the disappeared. Mr Hamilton was right to make reference to the tragic events of the weekend in relation to that, and the Assembly has expressed its view on that.

I support the first group of amendments. The process should be opened up to any person who might have a legitimate need or desire to go to the court to seek a declaration.

I appreciate the fact that the Department listened to the view that it was possible that the existing clauses were overly restrictive and that it has accepted the amendments in relation to that matter.

I want to focus on the disclosure-of-information clause, the new clause 10A, which is created by amendment No 5. The Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977, on which this piece of legislation is based, has a clause requiring anyone with information relevant to an investigation to bring it before the court. Some respondents to the initial consultation agreed that such a clause should be included. In particular, I noted that such a view came from the judiciary and from the organisation WAVE, which represents the families of the disappeared. At the outset, my instinct also was that there ought to be full disclosure and a duty for full disclosure on anyone with knowledge pertinent to the matter being considered by the court. If there is any hint that any public body is resisting the disclosure of its information, my instinct is that it should not be permitted to do that.

That matter is particularly relevant to the issue of the disappeared, which involves deaths that have been the subject of much examination and scrutiny. Therefore, there are *prima facie* grounds for believing that considerable information might be held by such bodies as the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Army, the security services, and the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains.

I probed that issue very considerably at the Committee, and I want to state why I am now prepared to support the weaker clause on disclosure, as presented in amendment No 5. I have listened seriously to the advice on the matter that was given by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials, who stated that the intention is to create as simple a mechanism as possible for the families of the disappeared. Those officials said that a general obligation on disclosure might result in a large amount of information being produced. If that were to happen, it would mean that they, with their legal representatives, would have a duty to examine and study the information that came forward and respond to it. That would produce a

considerable burden, including an emotional burden, on the families of the disappeared.

I hear what is being said: that — in relation to this piece of legislation and in relation to a decision on a declaration — the task of the court is not to have a full investigation of a disappearance; its task is to decide whether a declaration of presumption of death ought to be awarded. That can be done either on the basis of there being evidence that a person has died or on the basis that a person has not been known to be alive for the period of seven years.

Having examined exactly what the judiciary said about this matter, I note that their view was not particularly detailed or specific. I hope that, as events work their way through in the future, I am not proven wrong on this matter. Even if no legal requirement exists, there remains a very strong moral burden on anyone who knows of information relevant to a matter under consideration by a court to present that to the court.

In accepting amendment No 5, I will comment further on the concerns that were expressed by the families of the disappeared, as represented by WAVE. When the legislation is passed, everyone involved in its implementation must consider the concerns of those families. It is important to note that not all the families of the disappeared want to avail themselves of this process. There are, essentially, two views about that. There are families who see the process and the obtaining of a declaration of a presumption of death to be beneficial — it might be referred to as “closure”. I am never comfortable using the word “closure” in relation to these sad circumstances, but we can understand the intention behind using it.

There are other families who take a very understandable and different view. What they — and all families — want to achieve is to have the remains of their loved ones returned to them so that they can give them a proper Christian burial. They would not want any suggestion that because this legal process is due to them, their righteous demands for the return of remains are in any way diminished. For that reason, some families will not want to avail of this process, and that must be fully understood.

It is important that the process of obtaining such declarations through the courts should be simple and straightforward, and everything should be done by all concerned to ensure that it is so. Those families who choose to go through such a process need and deserve both practical and emotional support: they need practical assistance before the process starts and as it continues.

The issue of costs is also involved. A great wrong has been brought to those families in the first instance through the removal of their loved ones. They have lived through uncertain times in the initial days. In some cases they have hoped for the safe return of their

loved one, only to have to come to terms with the fact that that loved one will never return alive, and they have then entered into the long years of waiting and hoping that the remains of that loved one will be returned. They have already carried that great burden. It is reasonable to say that the costs associated with obtaining some degree of closure should be carried at the public expense, not at the expense of those families.

Finally, I will comment on the seven-year rule. That time period is regarded internationally as the norm. However, some recent thinking suggests that, in certain cases, seven years is too long a period to show that a missing person has not been known to be alive. Other families who seek closure in relation to a likely death — for family, business and administrative reasons — feel that the seven-year rule ought to be altered. I am satisfied that the Bill, which contains the seven-year rule, but which also contains a mechanism whereby it can be altered in the future without primary legislation, is a satisfactory outcome.

**Dr Farry:** I support the first group of amendments. I welcome the fact that the Bill is moving towards its Final Stage.

As regards amendment No 1, it is worth stressing that the Bill is a general piece of legislation that should be on our books to deal with a situation where a death is presumed to have occurred. We have a particular set of circumstances in Northern Ireland, relating to those people who are deemed to be the disappeared. However, it is worth stressing that the legislation is much more wide-ranging than that.

It is also worth stressing that the disappeared form a particular category of individuals, which has been defined through a British/Irish treaty and subsequent legislation in the UK Parliament and the Oireachtas, and which refers to a particular set of circumstances with a time limit. Other people may not meet the legal definition of those described as the disappeared, but, to all intents and purposes, they fall into a similar category. I have in mind the tragic case of one of my constituents, Lisa Dorrian, who disappeared from the Ards Peninsula three or four years ago. It is important that that case does not disappear from the public's imagination and that pressure remains on those who have information to come forward to the authorities with that information and to give some sense of closure to the Dorrian family — although I accept that closure is a very loaded word, as Declan O'Loan has said.

Although that family does not necessarily come under the definition of the disappeared, it does come under the Bill's more general provisions.

*1.15 pm*

Amendment No 1 does not introduce the special category of the disappeared: that was covered under the legislation to begin with. The purpose of the

amendment is much more limited. It addresses any questions about the standing of anyone taking a case — whether the victim was properly domiciled in Northern Ireland at the time of the disappearance or the person who takes the case is properly domiciled in Northern Ireland.

Amendment No 1 removes any issues in that respect and ensures that anyone related to one of the disappeared is given sufficient standing to instigate High Court proceedings in order to address the situation pertaining to their family member. In so far as the Bill is intended to deal with that problem, it is important for the Assembly to dot every i and cross every t, and I am satisfied that amendment No 1 does so.

Amendment No 5 relates to a point that has already been well stressed. I began this process thinking that the best way forward would be to impose a general obligation on people to bring forward what information they had to the courts. However, having listened to arguments from the Department, and quite vigorous and lengthy debate among Committee members and officials, I am satisfied that amendment No 5 is the most effective way forward.

I will not use the language that Mr O'Loan used when describing this as a weaker version of the way forward. It is probably best to refer to it as the most effective way in which to ensure that information comes forward without creating unrealistic burdens and expectations and avoiding an almost unmanageable flow of information.

Tragically, there are situations that require the presumption of death to be invoked. Thankfully, such occasions are very few. Important as it is to have the Bill on the statute book, I hope that it will be used sparingly. I welcome the progress made today, and support the amendments in group 1.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** As has been said, it is poignant that we are discussing this important issue, which seeks to deliver practical assistance to families dealing with the loss of loved ones in harrowing and difficult circumstances. Given the events of the weekend, it is all the more important that the Assembly deals with such issues in a very considered and appropriate way.

Therefore, I am grateful to all Members who have spoken and commented on the proposals and measures in the Bill. I am also grateful to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which has considered, debated and taken evidence on the Bill in considerable detail, and to every Member who has looked closely at the Bill. Their work and representations have resulted in a better Bill overall, which is what we want to have. It is good that the legislative process is shown to work, and that it can make changes for the better for those whom the Bill is intended to help.

I am grateful to the Committee Chairperson for his comments. He reprised the discussions that took place at Committee Stage. As I said, I am pleased that the measures and steps that the Department and I have taken have gone some way towards reassuring the families of the disappeared through moving amendment No 1. I am also pleased that the Committee's report endorses the new clause on "disclosure of information".

Mr Hamilton raised issues about amendment No 1 and on the new jurisdictional rule. He also endorsed the new disclosure clause. I welcome his support for the measures that were taken.

Mr O'Loan raised a number of issues, and I listened carefully to what he said about his initial approach and then his consideration of the matters as they went through the Committee. He mentioned the duty of disclosure and the fact that there was an opportunity to consider that issue in Committee. He knows that, during consultation, there was support for a duty of disclosure, but that there are difficulties with the Assembly being able to bind United Kingdom Departments. However, I am pleased that he is now reasonably content to accept the Department's position on the way forward, as has been set out.

I entirely understand that some of the families of the disappeared seek only the return of the bodies. The families who wish to avail of the new procedures will be assisted as far as possible. My officials are also examining funding issues in addition to the availability of legal aid.

I am grateful for Dr Farry's remarks, and also for his general support for the Bill and its provisions. He mentioned his constituent Lisa Dorrian and the particular circumstances of that case. I hope and pray that all of those families ultimately get what they wish for, which is to have the bodies of their loved ones returned to them so that they can have a proper burial, and also to find some degree of closure to what are very difficult and trying circumstances.

I thank everybody who took part — both today and in the Committee — for their work on this most important piece of legislation.

*Amendment No 1 agreed to.*

*Amendment No 2 made:* In page 2, line 4, Leave out "subsection" and insert "subsections (2)(c) and". —  
[*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).*]

*Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 2 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

**Clause 6 (Effect on property rights of variation order)**

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the second group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 3, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 4, 6 and 7. Those amendments deal with annuities and other

periodical payments that are paid as a result of a declaration of presumed death, and they will reduce the requirement for insurance on the part of recipients of such payments. They further deal with amending the definition of "insurer".

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I beg to move amendment No 3: In page 4, line 12, after "declaration" insert

"(other than a capital sum which has been distributed by way of an annuity or other periodical payment)".

*The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:*

No 4: In clause 7, page 4, line 42, after "sum" insert

"(other than in respect of an annuity or other periodical payment)".

— [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).*]

No 6: In clause 16, page 8, line 4, at end insert

"'insurer' means any person who provides for the payment of benefits on the death of any person;". — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).*]

No 7: In clause 16, page 8, leave out lines 20 to 32.

— [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).*]

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Amendment Nos 3 and 4 seek to modify the treatment of capital sums that are paid out by insurers in clauses 6 and 7 of the Bill. The purpose of the amendments is to make sure that this Bill treats payments to insurers in the same way as they are treated under the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977. Under the Scottish Act, payments of capital sums by way of annuity or other periodical payments are excluded from the scope of the obligation on the courts to take into account the need to return capital sums to insurers when making a property variation order on foot of an order that varies the original declaration of death. The payments are also excluded from the scope of the right of insurers to require the recipient of capital insurance sums to take out indemnity insurance.

Under clauses 6 and 7 of our Bill, no special provision is made in relation to capital sums that are paid out by way of annuity or other periodical payments. The practical effect of the amendments will be that in those cases in which life insurance is paid out in periodical payments, or by way of annuity, the insurer making the payment will not be able to require the recipient to take out reinsurance to cater for the possibility that the missing person may not, in fact, be dead.

Those two technical amendments have been raised with the insurance industry, which agrees that the Northern Ireland legislation should treat those payments and repayments in the same way as they are treated under the corresponding Scottish legislation.

Amendment Nos 6 and 7 are technical amendments to replace the definition of insurer at clause 16(2) and 16(3). The current definition of insurer is unnecessarily

complex and is tied to the regulatory framework for the carrying out of insurance business as set out in the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. Although legally correct, that cumbersome definition is not required for the purposes of the Bill.

Amendment No 6 would insert a new single definition of insurer:

“‘insurer’ means any person who provides for the payment of benefits on the death of any person;”.

That simpler definition is modelled on the definition of insurer in the Presumption of Death (Scotland) Act 1977. Indeed, it is also to be found in the current definition at clause 16(2)(c) as a catch-all provision to cover those persons providing for the payment of benefits on the death of a person who is not included in the regulatory framework of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000.

To be clear, that simpler definition does not extend the scope of the Bill in any way. It is a technical, presentational amendment to make it easier for the general reader to understand the circumstances when insurance moneys or other death benefits may have to be repaid, should the missing person who has been presumed to be dead turn out to be alive.

Amendment No 7 is consequential to amendment No 6 and removes from the Bill the current definition of insurer in clause 16(2) and 16(3). I beg to move the amendments.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister set out this group of amendments in significant detail, so I will dwell on the Committee’s consideration of it.

I will deal first with amendment No 3, which would amend clause 6, and amendment No 4, which would amend clause 7. The Committee discussed concerns that were expressed by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission about the need for clarification from the insurance industry on the likely costs of payments associated with the requirement for certain persons, including trustees or the recipient of a missing person’s life insurance money, to take out insurance to cover the costs of returning insurance money should it be subsequently established that the missing person is still alive. At that time, the Department advised the Committee that the insurance industry was unable to provide specific information on likely premium rates to be paid in those cases in which either the legislation or an insurer imposes an obligation on a person to take out insurance to cover the possibility that a missing person may not be dead.

However, information on premiums that are payable in comparable circumstances, including in respect of missing beneficiary insurance, was provided to the Committee. In addition, the Department emphasised that

the courts retain the power to disapply the requirement in certain circumstances. Therefore, it is not always the case that there will be a requirement for insurance.

I confirm that the Committee welcomes the proposed amendments, which will clarify the treatment of annuities and other periodical payments and which will reduce the number of instances when insurance may be required under the legislation.

I now turn to the Committee’s consideration of amendment Nos 6 and 7, which would amend clause 16. The Department advised of its plans to provide a simpler definition of insurer that is not tied into the regulatory framework. The Committee was content with that proposal and welcomes a more streamlined approach to dealing with insurance issues.

In summary, I support amendment No 3, which would amend clause 6, and the associated amendment No 4, which would amend clause 7. On behalf of the Committee, I also support amendment No 6, which would amend clause 16, along with the consequential amendment No 7.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I am grateful to the Chairperson of the Committee for his comments, and I have nothing further to add to previous remarks.

*Amendment No 3 agreed to.*

*Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### **Clause 7 (Insurance against claims)**

*Amendment No 4 made:* In page 4, line 42, after “sum” insert

“(other than in respect of an annuity or other periodical payment)”.  
— [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]

*Clause 7, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 8 to 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### **New Clause**

*Amendment No 5 made:* After clause 10, insert the following new clause:

“Disclosure of information

10A.—(1) Where the High Court is of the opinion that it is necessary for the purpose of disposing of proceedings under section 1 or section 5, the Court may, of its own motion or on the application of a party to the proceedings, make an order requiring any person who is not a party to the proceedings to disclose to the Court such information as the Court considers relevant to the determination of the question of whether a missing person is alive or dead as may be specified in the order.

(2) Nothing in subsection (1) shall impose a duty to disclose information—

(a) which is permitted or required by any rule of law to be withheld on grounds of public interest immunity;

(b) which any person would be entitled to refuse to provide on grounds of legal professional privilege;

(c) if the disclosure of that information might incriminate the person disclosing the information, or his or her spouse or civil partner, of an offence.

(3) Before making an order under subsection (1), the High Court must serve notice of its intention to make the order on any person who, in the opinion of the Court, is likely to be affected by the order.

(4) The High Court may discharge or vary an order made by it under this section on an application made to the Court by any person affected by the order.

(5) Rules of court may make provision as to the practice and procedure to be followed in connection with proceedings relating to orders under this section.

(6) This section binds the Crown to the full extent authorised or permitted by the constitutional laws of Northern Ireland.” — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds)*.]

*New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 11 to 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### **Clause 16 (Interpretation)**

*Amendment No 6 made:* In page 8, line 4, at end insert

“‘insurer’ means any person who provides for the payment of benefits on the death of any person;”. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds)*.]

*Amendment No 7 made:* In page 8, leave out lines 20 to 32. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds)*.]

*Clause 16, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 17 and 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### **Clause 19 (Commencement)**

*Amendment No 8 made:* In page 9, line 10, at end insert “( ) section 9(1);”. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds)*.]

*Amendment No 9 made:* In page 9, line 10, at end insert “( ) section 10A(5);”. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds)*.]

*Clause 19, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 20 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### **Schedule 1 (Register of Presumed Deaths)**

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the third group of amendments. There is only one amendment for debate. Amendment No 10 deals with changing, from a discretionary power to a statutory duty, the role of the Registrar General in annotating the register, where it emerges that a death certificate has been issued outside Northern Ireland.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I beg to move amendment No 10: In page 11, line 18, at end insert

“( ) Where it appears to the Registrar General that the death of a missing person, being a person to whom an entry in the Register of Presumed Deaths relates, has been registered in the register of deaths or recorded in any register kept or maintained under the law of a country or territory outside Northern Ireland corresponding in nature to the register of deaths, the Registrar General must mark or annotate the relevant entry in the Register of Presumed Deaths accordingly.”

The amendment will impose a duty on the Registrar General for Northern Ireland to mark or annotate an entry in the register of presumed deaths in certain circumstances. Paragraph 4(2) of schedule 1 to the Bill already allows the Registrar General to mark or annotate, or to cancel the marking or annotation of, any entry in the register of presumed deaths.

We intend the power to provide the Registrar General with a wide discretion to annotate an entry in such circumstances as he sees fit. Therefore, if the Registrar General became aware that a missing person was still alive, even though no revocation order had been obtained from the High Court, he would be able to mark the entry so that any further certified copies obtained of the entry would indicate that the missing person had been reported to be alive.

At Committee Stage, some of the families of the disappeared gave evidence to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, stating that, where the remains of any of the disappeared have been located subsequent to a finding of presumed death, the entry in the register of presumed deaths should be cancelled, or at least annotated in some way. My officials explained to the Committee that, given that an entry in the register of presumed deaths is made on foot of a High Court order, it is necessary to obtain a variation order from the High Court before any entry can be cancelled.

In order to go some way to meeting the concerns of the families of the disappeared, we have decided to spell out the circumstances in which the Registrar General shall be under a duty to mark or annotate an entry in the register of presumed deaths. I am sure that other families of missing persons who are presumed dead will also welcome that measure.

The duty will arise where the Registrar General becomes aware that the death of a missing person has been recorded in the register of deaths that he keeps in Northern Ireland or in any register of deaths that is kept or maintained under the law of a country or territory outside Northern Ireland. That covers other registers of death in the rest of United Kingdom and those of other countries such as the Irish Republic and France, where bodies of the disappeared are believed to have been buried. Amendment No 10 is a small, technical amendment to the schedule 1 provisions, which deal with the register of presumed deaths.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann

Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The Committee discussed the concerns that the WAVE Trauma Centre raised about how a death may be re-registered if the body of one of the disappeared is located, and the death has already been included in the register of presumed deaths.

In response to those concerns, the Committee proposed to the Department of Finance and Personnel that the discretionary power of the Registrar General to annotate an entry in the register be amended to a statutory duty in cases in which he becomes aware that a missing person's death has been registered outside Northern Ireland. Amendment No 10, which the Minister tabled, responds positively to the Committee's proposition.

The Committee believes that the amendment could help to allay some of the concerns that witnesses raised, and address the need to facilitate the updating of records subsequent to the recovery of remains and the issuing of a death certificate. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support amendment No 10.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Once again, I am grateful for the Chairperson's remarks and for the Committee's support.

*Amendment No 10 agreed to.*

*Schedule 1, as amended, agreed to.*

*Schedules 2 and 3 agreed to.*

*Long title agreed to.*

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Presumption of Death Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Social Security Offices

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

**Mr G Robinson:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to withdraw her plans to revise services at Social Security Offices as recommended under the Strategic Business Review, following a similar decision being taken in England.

At the outset, I offer my heartfelt condolences to the families of the soldiers who were so brutally murdered in Antrim on Saturday night, and I wish all those who were injured a complete and speedy recovery.

I am honoured to propose this important motion. I want to pay tribute to the staff in our social security offices, who provide a personal service — daily and under severe pressure — to help customers and local communities in need of their expertise to claim benefit. I commend those staff for their daily efforts and loyal service.

I am pleased that the Minister is in the Chamber for this very important debate and hope that she will appreciate that the motion is not a personal attack on her. Today's debate is about tackling a growing problem in Northern Ireland — how we deal with the growing number of people who are becoming unemployed.

It is not an opportunity for political point-scoring, because the issue is much too serious. The motion simply enables the Assembly to debate this important issue. Its wording was carefully thought out. It does not call for the Minister to abandon the process of service provision but asks her to withdraw the proposals.

That terminology is a carefully measured response to the growing need for local office services in the Social Security Agency (SSA). I hope that the Minister will appreciate that the motion seeks to address an immediate and urgent need. I understand that no local office will be closed but that services that are available in local offices will be severely curtailed due to the proposed establishment of 16 benefit-processing centres that will each deal with only one benefit and to which the public will not have access. I find that unacceptable.

The additional pressure put on local office staff means that maintaining and strengthening the service that those offices provide is an essential response to the rise in unemployment. Devolution was intended to provide local solutions to local problems, and that is

one local solution that is required urgently and that can be delivered. The strategic business review proposals will see many offices being reduced to counter service only. Counter staff will be fewer in number, warm telephone lines will be provided, for which I understand that calls will be limited to 10 minutes, or a computer-based claim process will be implemented. That contradicts the findings of the PricewaterhouseCoopers survey that showed that the majority of SSA customers consider face-to-face interviews with staff as the only way that they can resolve their problems. I note that that survey was commissioned by the management of the SSA, but the findings have obviously made no impact on its thinking.

Why will every office not be equipped with a telephony service? Why is the great reliance on the telephony service being used to promote the strategic business review recommendations? In truth, the two are like chalk and cheese. At a time when we need to process more claims, that is neither a practical nor an advisable route to follow. It is my belief that the current proposals hinge on a wing and a prayer and are based on the hope that footfall in each local office will drop considerably due to the introduction of untried telephony and new IT systems. To base a discussion on such a hope is acceptable, but to put forward proposals on that basis is ludicrous.

Staff in our local offices face a backlog of cases that grows daily. Revision of the services that local offices provide, as suggested in 'Delivering a Better Service for Customers', will only impede staff and will, in fact, reduce that service. Part of the pressure on the local office staff goes back to the 2004 Fit for Purpose initiative, which resulted in the loss of 674 posts in the Social Security Agency. Given that local office staff are barely able to cope at present, how will they cope with a further reduction in staff numbers? The answer is simple: they will be unable to cope.

The Minister should examine the course of action followed by the Department for Work and Pensions in GB, which has suspended a planned efficiency drive and has recruited the additional staff that are needed to deal with the increasing backlog. The people of Northern Ireland — the local office staff — deserve the same recognition.

At present, many offices are working with a claims-processing backlog of up to five weeks, and staff are working on Saturdays to try to reduce it. The strategic business review proposals will serve only to compound the backlog and demoralise staff. Only by reinforcing and enhancing the staff provision in every local office — as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has done in England — can the Department look properly after those who have lost their jobs. Such people are sometimes in great distress and are often in urgent need of money. The present staff are doing their

job while being overwhelmed by a backlog of work. We must ensure that staff in local offices will not suffer burnout due to the additional workload.

I also have grave concern for those who claim benefit and have literacy or numeracy problems. A telephone or computer system may result in claimants not receiving the full benefit to which they are entitled, or they may perhaps be entirely put off claiming the benefits that they need. We must also be concerned about older people, who may not be computer-literate and who find face-to-face interviews the only way to resolve their problems. Such vulnerable people desperately need to see someone in person to guide them through the process of claiming the benefit. The strategic business review proposals will result in people having to wait for the member of staff who is dealing with their benefit to make an appointment for them to be seen. In the worst-case scenario, that could take weeks. At present, people can see someone with specialist knowledge of their particular benefit in the local office after a short wait. What will people do for money if they have to wait weeks to see an adviser? I am sure that all Members can see the drawbacks in the proposed changes.

It is my firm belief that these proposals will result in confusion for claimants while heaping intense additional pressure on the SSA staff in local offices who at present are barely coping. That is not acceptable.

*1.45 pm*

I know that the recruitment of 150 new staff is under way. That is a welcome move, and I congratulate the Minister for implementing that. However, the current proposals will lead to a reduction of approximately 200 staff, and I calculate that that leaves an overall reduction of 50 staff. I find that unacceptable.

At meetings that I have had with staff and union representatives it has become obvious that, as they stand, the proposals will put some people in the position in which they will be unable to continue working because of care duties. Some people have told me that if they have to relocate, they may no longer be able to work for the SSA — and I emphasise the word "may" — rather, they will become one of its customers. One member of staff informed me that if they were relocated they would have to leave home at about 6.00 am, and would not return home until around 8.00 pm, because they depend on public transport. That is a totally unacceptable state of affairs when it comes to the work/life balance, and one which almost guarantees burnout.

I believe that the proposals are in direct contravention of the Bain report, which proposed the decentralisation of jobs. I ask the Assembly to recognise that now is the time to push aside the proposals that are in the strategic business review. I ask the Minister to indicate that she

is in agreement with the motion and with halting the implementation of the proposals due to the negative impact that they will have. At the very least, I hope that the Minister will be able to say that although the consultation exercise has been interesting, due to the change in economic circumstances, any service provision must be placed in a new context. I ask all Members to support the very important motion.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh míle maith agat. I support the motion. In his foreword to the strategic business review into how services are provided within local offices, the chief executive of the Social Security Agency stated that the purpose of the review is:

“to ensure the future delivery of high quality services for customers.”

At least he got one thing right; the provision of a quality service to the customer is paramount. The customer is the most important person in all this and deserves the best service available.

Although Sinn Féin welcomes the consultation, the party is very concerned at the level of upheaval that will no doubt be caused if the proposed changes are implemented, particularly given the huge economic downturn that we are experiencing throughout the island of Ireland. In the current economic climate such a dramatic overhaul would lead to further disarray and confusion for an already hard hit public.

Sinn Féin believes that the current proposals will serve only to further deteriorate the service that is in place, and will not lead to a better service for customers or to enhanced benefit take-up. I think that the current approach undermines any commitment by the Minister for Social Development to protect the most vulnerable sections of the community and those employed in the Social Security Agency.

In the strategic business review, all front line service proposals put forward are predicated on what happens in England, where 80% of claims are dealt with by phone. I challenge the assumption that front line services will not be affected by the proposed changes. There are many people claiming benefit who need face to face contact in their claim. The strategic business review does not take into account the views and concerns of those vulnerable people who need the reassurance and support that face to face contact can provide. The Minister has to take into account the unique nature of benefit provision and uptake.

A major point is that the social security staff and the unions have yet to endorse the proposals. I have met extensively with social security staff in the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) who feel that their concerns are being ignored and undermined, almost to the point of arrogance. Staff morale in local offices is already very low and nothing has been done to constructively address that.

Under the proposed efficiency savings it is likely that up to 200 jobs will be phased out by 2011. However, the Minister and the Social Security Agency chiefs continue to state that there will be no job losses. I simply do not believe that to be the case. The Social Security Agency is making much of the enhanced telephony service which will deal with the projected number of claims. However, unless some miracle occurs, that will not be fit for purpose. Staff will be asked to travel much longer distances with the added problems of sorting out childcare and accessing transport. Once again, Social Security Agency executives are downplaying those real concerns.

On 27 October 2008, the introduction of employment support allowance added to the confusion, and is already proving to be problematical.

The Committee for Social Development has called on the Minister to scrap the strategic business review, and, indeed, some Committee members from her own party expressed misgivings about it. Perhaps that was playing to the electorate. The strategic business review continues apace. That makes one wonder who is pulling the strings — the Social Security Agency executives, who appear to be leading the charge, or the Minister, who is ultimately responsible. The proposals can only compound failures that are already inherent in the system, and duty and commitment to the customer must remain paramount. I call on the Minister to think again. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch):** The Committee has considered the Social Security Agency's strategic business review at a number of meetings. In order to better understand the issues in contention, the Committee heard from the Social Security Agency, NIPSA and a number of other advice providers. The Committee has considered the advice that all of those witnesses have provided. To further inform their understanding, Committee members visited a jobs and benefits office and the Belfast benefit delivery centre. Members made a point of speaking to operational staff in order to get a feeling about the proposed changes from those who would be directly affected.

As has been said, the strategic business review proposes a degree of rationalisation of back-office activities and their relocation to a number of offices in Northern Ireland. That will mean that some Social Security Agency staff will be obliged to change their place of work. In addition, a number of staff are to be redeployed outside the jobs and benefits office network. The Social Security Agency has also set out plans for the enhanced use of telephone appointments and for appointments for its front-office activities.

The Committee viewed all of the proposals with great concern, for a number of reasons. First, as has

been said, the economic downturn has put considerable strain on the jobs and benefits office system. The last thing that the Committee wants to see is those who have lost their jobs experience difficulty or delay in accessing the benefits to which they are entitled. For that reason alone, the Committee agreed that, in the current economic climate, the strategic business review was ill-timed and should be set aside. The Committee welcomed the Minister's announcement relating to additional recruitment for the Social Security Agency, but it remains concerned about the timing of the review.

Secondly, the Committee was concerned about the impact of the review on members of staff of the Social Security Agency. Those individuals do an important job in providing care, which requires training. The Committee was advised that many of the staff members had childcare or other caring responsibilities and consequently made use of family-friendly working arrangements. The proposal to relocate the place of work of those staff members long distances from their homes could make continued employment untenable. The Committee was particularly concerned that that aspect of the proposals could have a disproportionate effect on working mothers and women with other caring responsibilities. The Committee, therefore, strongly urged the Minister to review that aspect of the proposals.

Thirdly, the Committee considered the enhanced use of telephony for social security claimants. To inform our review of that, the Committee took evidence from independent advice providers, who highlighted concerns to do with how a telephony-based system would deal with vulnerable people with, for instance, learning difficulties or those for whom English was not their first language. Committee members were impressed by the measures that have been adopted by Social Security Agency at its Belfast benefit delivery centre to manage vulnerable and other claimants. Nonetheless, the Committee takes the view that face-to-face contact is an essential part of the jobs and benefits office service and that that, with challenging customer service standards, must be maintained.

The Committee has made its views clear on the strategic business review of the Social Security Agency. Recently, the agency appeared to indicate that it wants the Committee to consider mitigating measures that it intends to adopt in response to the Committee's criticisms. The Committee has indicated its unanimous opposition to the strategic business review, but it will, of course, hear the agency's proposals and make its view known on those in due course.

**Mr Armstrong:** The Ulster Unionist Party has no objection to the strategic business review of the Social Security Agency. However, it has grave concerns about the wisdom of seeking to implement major reforms when there is rising unemployment, the onset of recession

and chaos in the world's financial systems with little prospect of a swift recovery.

The key aim of any benefit system is to provide the best possible service to the public and to ensure that people who are entitled to benefits receive them. During the past 12 months, there has been a dramatic increase in unemployment. I declare an interest, because the situation in Mid Ulster is particularly worrying. Official figures that were released in January indicate that the Magherafelt District Council and Cookstown District Council areas are among the worst-affected local authority areas in the United Kingdom for percentage increases in the number of people who claim unemployment benefit.

Indeed, no fewer than six Northern Ireland council areas were placed in the 10 worst-affected areas in the entire United Kingdom. Although, as a representative for Mid Ulster, I am, obviously, concerned that Cookstown and Magherafelt are ranked as the worst two council areas in the region, I am mindful that Dungannon, Banbridge, Ballymoney and Limavady also appear in the top 10. Those figures should bring home to all Members the seriousness of the current situation throughout Northern Ireland.

The severity of the situation is confirmed by data that shows that unemployment in Northern Ireland rose by 12,200 between January 2008 and December 2008 to a total of 35,900. There is fear that unemployment figures could eventually rise to 50,000.

Mid Ulster has been hit badly by the decline in the construction industry, particularly as it affects small building firms. Those losses are in addition to the decline in traditional employment sectors, such as the agrifood industry and the textile industry in particular, which has been in a state of crisis for the past decade.

With that in mind, the Assembly must question the wisdom of seeking to implement major reform at a time when the claimant count increases daily. Staff in benefits offices have had a difficult enough time keeping up with their workload and the large influx of new claimants. The Assembly must also be concerned about the untried and untested nature of some of the proposals, including those for a new telephony system and the increased use of customer access phones.

Although those innovations have been worked out, sufficient doubts have been raised to warrant further consultation. I am also worried about how the strategic business review worked out in Great Britain, where 492 job centres have closed since 2002, and one has closed every week since January 2008. In the current economic climate, that is a huge gamble and is not one that I believe that Northern Ireland should take.

I support the motion.

**Mr Burns:** I am happy to have the chance to say a few words on the motion, which I oppose. Many Members have made claims about the review, some of which might cause concern among the general public. A few points must be made clear. I am sure that the Minister will go into them in more detail when she speaks to the motion later in the debate.

As regards changes, the situation in England is not the same as the situation in Northern Ireland. The review is not about job cuts or office closures: it is about improving the Social Security Agency. The current system is around 40 years old, and a change is long overdue.

Let us be clear about the review of the Social Security Agency: the proposals are still the subject of public consultation; there are no plans to close public offices; large numbers of staff will not have to change offices; people will not have to travel long distances to their place of work; and there are no plans to shed large numbers of jobs.

2.00 pm

**Mr McCarthy:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Burns:** No, you are all right.

No one will lose their jobs. In fact, it will be necessary to hire more staff, and 150 extra staff will be brought in to cope with rising unemployment during the credit crunch. The Minister is committed to providing the best possible service to people who use the Social Security Agency.

**Mr McClarty:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Burns:** There is plenty of room for Members to speak.

People are entitled to, and deserve no less than, a top-class service, particularly now when they need it most and when many people are being made unemployed because of the credit crunch. This review will help to ensure that the Minister delivers the best possible service, not only now but in the future. The review is concerned not with cuts, but with improvements. I oppose the motion.

**Ms Lo:** The Alliance Party supports the motion.

I understand that as a result of the comprehensive spending review and other budgetary requirements, DSD is under enormous pressure to make efficiency savings. Furthermore, I understand the rationale behind DSD's attempt to change the balance of service delivery to telephony and appointment-based systems in social security offices. Moreover, I understand the concerns that were expressed by Members who spoke previously about the loss of face-to-face appointments and the proposed telephony services, which might disadvantage many groups in our community.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Member for giving way. I will ask my colleague the question that I wanted to ask the Member who spoke previously, who has now left the Chamber. Does she agree that people find it difficult enough to go into those offices to be questioned, but that it is even more humiliating, almost, to have to stand and queue to ask questions through a telephone system?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Ms Lo:** I agree with my colleague.

It is, perhaps, worth noting that the Committee visited the Belfast benefit delivery centre, which employs 800 staff and provides centralised benefit processing for approximately 177,000 customers in several London districts on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. Given Northern Ireland's small population, if it were to follow the same system as in Great Britain, it would require one or two processing centres, rather than the 18 that are proposed.

However, I have a major problem with the timing of the proposed changes that will arise from the review. Given the severe economic downturn, an unprecedented number of people will be registering as unemployed and seeking benefits. Is October the right time to make such fundamental changes to our system, given that it is very likely that we will still be in a deep recession?

I have a reservation, too, about the relocation of offices, with back offices to be centralised in 18 centres on 16 sites.

**Mr McClarty:** I thank the Member for giving way. The Member who spoke previously on behalf of the SDLP said that staff will not have to travel great distances. That may be so. However, some people depend on public transport. For instance, in my constituency, although Coleraine to Magherafelt is not a great distance, making that journey by public transport would add three hours to a person's day.

**Ms Lo:** Absolutely; I will mention that matter, too.

Of the 1,050 staff, 850 will be moved from their current offices, and 200 may be redeployed in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. That is a major upheaval for many people.

All MLAs have received correspondence from their constituents expressing concerns. Someone in Bangor wrote to me to say that a move of office from Bangor to Downpatrick would involve a journey by car in excess of one hour each way. That is obviously worse if the person has to travel by public transport, as there is no public-transport route between Bangor and Downpatrick. That would involve hours of journey time each way.

DSD officials say that it is reasonable to expect staff to travel an extra 30 miles to a new location and that there will be a compensation payment for extra travel. At peak times, surely travelling 30 miles would take one, two, or even more, hours each way. Is it reasonable to expect staff to do that?

People choose to work near their homes for various reasons, mostly to care for family or relatives. That is of particular relevance to female staff. People also prefer a work/life balance, and that should be taken into consideration. I am very concerned that staff who can find jobs elsewhere will leave their current positions in social security offices. Those are very experienced staff, and if many of them leave, it will be a great loss at a time when they are most needed to cope with increased demands, due to the higher level of unemployment as a result of the economic downturn.

I call on the Minister to suspend the proposal, to review the timing and to roll it out at a future date, when the climate is right.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support and welcome the motion, particularly because, as the Minister will be aware, it is a very big issue in my area of Strabane. I know that the Minister has met with the MP for the area on the matter. I would not go so far as to say that there was a meeting of minds about the way forward, but, as I understand it, the Minister made the point that it is difficult for her to do anything when the consultation is ongoing. I can understand that, but having said that, this is a good opportunity for me and others to make the case for our own areas — I will repeat some of the points made by my colleagues.

The front-office staff in Strabane will, as I understand, be reduced from around 43 to 10. There is rising unemployment, on top of an already existing situation in the area, where the jobs profile and employment situation is so poor. It was only last week that I saw on one of the media outlets — probably the BBC — reference to the exact situation. If I remember the figures correctly, there are 1,400 people on the register seeking jobs, but there are only 20 jobs available in Strabane. That is a very big issue.

I hope that the Minister is listening; I believe that she does listen on many occasions. However, we must in some way make the jump between listening and understanding the situation and actually putting something in place. I appeal to the Minister to look at the issue again, particularly in the case of Strabane, where, as I have said, the jobs profile is poor.

Mr McClarty, Ms Lo and other Members mentioned travel arrangements. The question:

“What is the longest distance staff will be expected to travel and will staff receive travelling expenses?”

was raised in the consultation document. The answer was:

“There is no definitive distance however the Agency will seek to ensure that staff who move do so within reasonable daily travel, in line with the mobility requirements that presently exist.”

That is not reassuring. At the weekend, I spoke to someone who may well be put in that position, and who was not convinced, on asking those questions, that the answers were available about excess travel and that people will get whatever it is that they are entitled to receive.

When I spoke to someone about this issue at the weekend, I was told that staff were processing claims in the Strabane office from 8.00 am to 4.00 pm on Saturday and Sunday of last weekend, and over three recent weekends. The management of the situation must be looked into. People say that I talk too much about Strabane, but there is a particular issue here. The Minister knows the place well, and I appeal to her to have another look, particularly at what is happening in Strabane. I have heard from people there that that is necessary. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr McQuillan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I endorse this motion along with my colleagues, having given consideration to the public's opinion and the staff who are affected by the implementation of the review. As can be seen in all the current information that is presented by the Department for Social Development, the review relates to outdated information on unemployment figures and does not truly reflect the requirements of the current economic situation.

Unemployment figures have risen sharply to 38,400 at the end of January — an increase of 2,200 in that month. It seems unrealistic to act on outdated information and to hope or expect the same proposed improvement to the delivery of our benefits system that would have primarily been anticipated by the review. If the Minister decides to implement the review, I can only see it as a disadvantage to the most vulnerable people in society. Surely those are the individuals whom we should protect the most. If we are trying to encourage the uptake of benefits by way of the review, we must concentrate on the availability of resources to address the current increase in unemployment.

How can the Minister assure the Assembly that the most vulnerable, including elderly people and adults with learning difficulties, will not be isolated by replacing human contact with call-handling systems? That will surely not assist the most disadvantaged. The Minister appears to be ignoring the Bain Report's recommendations on the decentralisation of public-sector jobs, by rotating approximately 40 to 50 posts from Coleraine to Magherafelt.

Mr McClarty has already made the point about how such a rotation of jobs will affect my constituency. If relocated, the staff in Coleraine benefits office will be given the normal allowance associated with re-employment, which would mean leaving Coleraine by Ulsterbus at 7.30 am and arriving in Magherafelt at 8.26 am. At the end of the working day, those staff would have to leave Magherafelt at 5.35 pm, arrive in Antrim at 6.23 pm, and then take another bus at 6.29 pm, eventually arriving back in Coleraine at 7.30 pm. Does the Minister feel that that is a reasonable request to make of public servants? Does she realise the negative effect that such arrangements might have on their family lives, and, in turn, on their performance in work? That knock-on effect could result in an increase in sickness levels.

Prior to the review, the assumption was that the Social Security Agency would retain parity with the Department for Work and Pensions on the issues of social security policy, legislation, benefits, and, where possible, IT systems. Has consideration been given to that? Why has the Minister not acted in the same manner as her counterparts on the mainland and suspended this exercise? I support the motion.

2.15 pm

**Mr Savage:** I support the motion and call on the Minister for Social Development to withdraw her plans to revise services at social security offices as recommended by the strategic business review following a similar decision in England.

The outworkings of the strategic business review will have a significant detrimental effect on my constituency of Upper Bann. Income support processing will be centralised in Newry, with staff from Banbridge, Lurgan, Armagh, Dungannon and Portadown having little or no choice but to move there from October 2009. Jobseeker's allowance processing staff will have no option but to relocate to Dungannon. All processing staff in the Banbridge and Lurgan offices will be forced to move out of their current premises.

Those proposals represent serious upheaval for those who, day in and day out, do a sterling job in administering social security benefits. Throughout this entire process staff have been treated with contempt. The Department for Social Development's strategic business review team merely brushed aside the questions that staff at the Banbridge social security office asked. In this day and age, that is not on.

The Minister has assured staff across Northern Ireland that there will be no pay-offs. However, one point that is missed out is that she chooses selectively to ignore the fact that there exists the potential for mass resignations. Recently, the Minister brought on board 150 new staff, 12 of whom were sent to the

south district. I find it deliberate and outrageous that not one of those 12 new staff was sent to Banbridge.

In addition, staff concerns about the effectiveness of the proposed changes in the telephone, Internet and appointments system have been ignored. Along with that, it is the customers — the public — who want face-to-face consultations to continue. Major concerns also exist about back-office staff in the Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown offices. The south district has been designated as the pilot area for the strategic business review. That means that if there are teething problems and hiccups — which is most likely — it will be the staff and customers of the south district who will suffer.

I support the motion, and I call on the Minister — for whom I have the greatest respect and regard — to see the folly of the proposals and to withdraw them as a matter of urgency. Mr Burns said that the social security system is 40 years old. However, it is working, and, in this day and age of unemployment, it is doing a good job.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. The current economic climate is one in which we see more and more workers flooding to social security offices, among them construction, manufacturing and public-sector workers, and many others. The proposed changes will cause a lot of confusion, upheaval and stress to staff and members of the public. I represent a large rural constituency in North Antrim, and like many other Members, I have been inundated with letters, telephone calls and e-mails from Social Security Agency staff. They do not want those changes, and they do not see any need for them given the ever-growing queues of the unemployed at their offices.

As my party colleague Claire McGill and the Member for East Derry Mr McClarty outlined, the proposals will have a large impact on rural workers and families, some of whom are already in great financial difficulties. The Minister needs to take that into account. As Mr McQuillan outlined, face-to-face communication is much better than any other form of communication. That should be blatantly obvious to us as elected representatives, because for people who are already vulnerable and disadvantaged, the telephone is a very poor means of communication when dealing with complicated issues such as benefits and claims. Face-to-face contact should continue to be available for those who require it.

The Minister needs to listen to the workers, to the unemployed and, above all, to every other political party in the Assembly and immediately withdraw her proposals. Go raibh maith agat.

**Miss McIlveen:** I am surprised by Mr Burns's remarks: since 22 January 2009, he has clearly had a road to Damascus experience. On that date, Mr Burns and his colleague Alban Maginness agreed with other members of the Committee to write to the Minister asking her to withdraw her proposals to implement the review. Those sentiments were echoed publicly by other members of the Minister's party.

Nevertheless, this debate comes at a time when the world is facing possibly the worst financial crisis in living memory. We received news today that the unemployment total will be worse than feared and that the economy is expected to decrease in the face of less investment. It is expected that there will be 3.2 million people unemployed in the UK by the second half of 2009. Between October 2008 and December 2008, that figure was 1.97 million — the worst figure since 1997.

The Federal Reserve has said that it does not expect to see any improvement in the US economy until late 2009 and possibly early 2010. That is the outlook despite the huge investment by the previous Administration and the new Administration. The US economy shrunk by 6.3% in the final three months of 2008; such hardship is being seen in countries all over the world, and we are all intrinsically tied into the peaks and troughs of the US economy.

Today, we are debating the delivery service that assists those hardest hit by the catastrophic circumstances of recent times. The DUP prides itself on the need to streamline and make efficiency savings, and I would generally support what the Minister and the Department are trying to achieve in this instance. Perhaps it is unfortunate that the current climate makes those changes neither palatable nor appropriate.

It cannot be disputed that the delivery of a high-quality and efficient public service is a key theme of the Programme for Government or that the key objective of the strategic business review is to secure the delivery of an efficient, modern and more accessible service in the longer term. In the current economic climate, people in the private sector are critical of those in the public sector and the perception of there being a job for life. We should be careful that we are not seen as providing a firewall for the public sector when the private sector is being hit so hard. Similarly, we cannot be seen to sit on our hands and do nothing.

The problem is that the strategic business review was undertaken at a time of relative economic prosperity — it was certainly not undertaken with knowledge of the storm that was on the horizon.

We have seen a phenomenal increase in demand for SSA services in recent months, which will only increase for the foreseeable future. We need to deliver an efficient, modern and more accessible service in the longer term, but we cannot leave a service in the short

and medium term that is not fit to cope with current demands.

I could naively say from a constituency viewpoint that the strategic business review will be good for my constituency because of job increases in Ards from the revised services. The Minister could also say that with respect to Downpatrick. Those jobs are merely located in the constituency and are not necessarily for people from the borough, never mind the wider constituency.

**Mr K Robinson:** Does the Member agree that the luxury of having public-sector jobs in a constituency is something that the people of East Antrim find very difficult to accept, since we have the lowest number of public-sector jobs of all the 18 constituencies?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Miss McIlveen:** I agree with the Member.

The increased number of jobs in Ards creates knock-on benefits for the local business community because of spending by the workforce, which is very welcome. That aside, a number of concerns have been raised by Members today on the proposed restructuring: for the sake of brevity, I will not repeat those concerns. A loss of between 200 and 500 posts is expected in addition to the 674 jobs that have been lost as a result of the "fit for purpose" initiative in 2004.

There will be a severe reduction in the current service provision because direct face-to-face contact will no longer be available. The new telephone systems that are being installed are untried, which may lead to additional, unnecessary frustration and anxiety. DWP has suspended its efficiency drive in the rest of the UK because of the increased uptake in benefits.

Given the additional demand on services and the cost of implementing the Minister's plans to revise services at social security offices, she should consider whether that should now happen. I ask the Minister to review her plans in the light of current circumstances and to make a determination based on what is happening today, rather than on what was happening when the strategic business review was undertaken. I look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. As Question Time will commence at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Allan Bresland.

*The debate stood suspended.*

2.30 pm

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

## Oral Answers to Questions

### REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

#### Street Lights

1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's policy on the positioning of new street lights in Housing Executive areas. (AQO 2226/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Roads Service has one common policy for the provision of street lighting in all housing areas. In all urban areas, roads, footways, footpaths, and car parks maintained by Roads Service will generally be lit. However, light will not normally be provided where footpaths provide only rear access to properties or an alternative route to an already lighted road or footpath.

The Member wrote to me recently about the provision of street lighting to back entries to counter antisocial behaviour. While I wholly sympathise with any residents who are experiencing incidences of antisocial behaviour from unlit back entries, issues regarding antisocial behaviour are for the PSNI to address.

**Mr Easton:** Can the Minister explain why, when the Housing Executive, the North Down District Policing Partnership and the PSNI have all written to Roads Service complaining about the removal of street lighting from Rathgael estate, that has not been taken into account when removing those lights?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** We are installing new street lighting in the Rathgael area as part of a programme to replace columns that have reached the end of their useful life. As I indicated, Roads Service policy is to provide lighting on roads, footpaths, and along the frontage of properties. Roads Service does not normally provide lighting to back entries, as to do so would increase costs and energy-consumption levels which cannot be sustained. That policy has been followed in providing the new street lighting system in the Rathgael area.

Roads Service has a policy not to light alternative routes where a route to a house is already lit. There may be an issue with back entries — and, as I have said, I sympathise with that — but there are thousands

of back entries all across the North. To start lighting all of those areas would have substantial implications for Roads Service and the street lighting budget. Where there are issues particularly associated with antisocial behaviour, there are others who need to be involved in addressing them.

**Mrs M Bradley:** Will the Minister look into increasing the wattage in the street lighting in all housing areas? I am particularly speaking about the Foyle area.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** We are always looking at ways to improve the street lighting system. The normal lifespan of a street light is around 25 or 30 years. When Roads Service considers the implementation of a new system, it will aim to use the best technology available. There are also issues of light pollution, and people will often raise that issue from an environmental perspective.

There are also issues associated with energy costs. We know from the last six or nine months how energy costs can impact on any of our budgets. Those issues have to be kept in the balance. Wherever technology will allow us to provide the best possible lighting systems, we will do that, but we have to bear in mind the implications of energy costs and light pollution.

**Mr McFarland:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does his Department have a system for regular consultation with community safety partnerships and the PSNI on issues such as street lighting?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am not sure if there is a system per se, but where there is a request for Roads Service to attend any of those multi-agency meetings to address such issues, I expect it to come along and play its part. It has a policy in how it provides street lighting, as I have outlined. When it comes to replacing old street lighting, the new policy will be adhered to: for example, there may be a replacement of certain lighting in certain parts of housing areas. If multi-agency groups are getting together to tackle issues around lighting and around housing developments, I expect that Roads Service should play its part.

### Roadworks 2008

2. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many roadworks were not completed on schedule in 2008. (AQO 2227/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Roads Service's business plan targeted five major roadworks schemes for completion in 2007-08. Four of those schemes were completed on schedule. The one scheme that was not completed on schedule was the £2.4 million Frederick Street Link in Newtownards. The

overall development and construction timetable for that particular scheme proved extremely challenging, but I am pleased to say that the scheme was opened to traffic in November 2008.

In any given year, construction on road schemes can be delayed, or postponed, due to problems with, for example, acquiring necessary lands or due to contractual difficulties. However, it is normal practice for Roads Service to bring forward alternative schemes in order to achieve its programmed in-year spend.

**Mr McClarty:** I thank the Minister for his answer. What steps has he introduced to ensure that his Department can monitor and evaluate the progress of contracts? Furthermore, in light of the inadequate roads' maintenance budget, what is his Department's, or, indeed, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's, assessment of the cost of poor roads' maintenance to local businesses in Northern Ireland?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In fairness, the Roads Service — and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) in general — has a good record, which the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) would acknowledge, in spending its capital budget. In cases in which land acquisition or contractual problems arise, Roads Service usually has several other schemes in the pipeline, ready to be brought forward in order to ensure that the budget is spent.

The Member will be aware — it is no secret — that the money allocated to Roads Service for the three-year Budget period is insufficient to meet the cost of structural maintenance. Normally, Roads Service is able to top up funding in the in-year monitoring rounds. However, this year, given the focus, and, in one sense, the success, of the Executive in spending their Budget, there have been negative implications for Roads Service. All Departments have been tight about spending their budgets, so there has been little money available in the monitoring rounds, and therefore, Roads Service has not benefited as much as it would normally expect to from money returned from other Departments in the latter half of the year.

I acknowledge that there is a difficulty with the structural-maintenance budget. In future Budget rounds — I have discussed this with Roads Service — rather than depending on the previous system of being allocated most of what is required and then having that topped-up in year, we must be much more assertive when bidding for overall structural-maintenance requirements. Given the way in which the Executive are approaching their spending programme, which is a good thing, it appears that little money will be surrendered in year, and that will have negative implications for Roads Service. Obviously, if the roads are not up to the required standard, there will be

implications for the economy throughout the North, so, when possible, we will continue to bid for money in order to improve the roads. Nevertheless, that requires money.

**Mr Shannon:** The Minister is absolutely right; the new Frederick Street roadway in Newtownards has made a tremendous difference, and the traffic flow is much more settled than in the past. In addition, we have had the Castlebawn development, which was at least 90% funded by developers. Where does the next stage of the Comber bypass feature in the Minister's future roads' scheme? Is there a timescale for that work? The last stage took some 35 years, so —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member should stick to his question.

**Mr Shannon:** This time, we hope that the Comber bypass will appear in a much shorter time — perhaps, given the Minister's statement, in the next five years.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In recent months, I had the pleasure of visiting the Castlebawn development, which has resulted in a substantial degree of progress in and around Newtownards. I am not sure of the exact time frame for the Comber-bypass scheme, although I sincerely hope that it will not take another 35 years. Nevertheless, I will obtain an up-to-date time frame for the scheme and forward it to the Member.

**Mrs Hanna:** Bearing in mind what the Minister said about the Road's Service inadequate budget, is its budget adequate enough to maintain footpaths and roads in a safe condition. I am particularly concerned about some areas in south Belfast, where there are high numbers of frail, but independent, people who want to get out, but they are falling regularly on the uneven slabs. When will the criteria for resurfacing be reviewed to take account of the levels of older people in areas?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Obviously, safety is the number one concern in respect of roads, footpaths and any other part of the infrastructure for which Roads Service is responsible. If a particular problem is identified, I would expect Roads Service to seriously consider it. I shall not decry my inadequate budget, saying that it is everybody else's fault. Every Department suffers from having less money than it might wish to have.

That becomes more evident at this time of the year, because the roads take a substantial pounding during the winter. Roads Service is used to getting some of the monitoring-round money that becomes available at this time of the year, but that has not happened this year. That is having an impact, but I do not want to make a great song and dance about my budgetary woes.

If there are problems in relation to locations in south Belfast, I will be glad to take details from the Member and ensure that Roads Service looks at them.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am delighted that the Minister has recognised the progress that we have been making around Newtownards, but I want to know when the funding for the peninsula area will be available. Not so long ago, funding was available for Main Street in Greyabbey and High Street in Portaferry. Those two roads are a disgrace. Can the Minister inform the residents and representatives of those areas when those two roads — and that is only two — will be tackled?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I knew that it would be a challenge to get away from talking about roads in the Ards Peninsula without hearing from Mr Shannon or Mr McCarthy. I do not have information to hand on the two schemes that Mr McCarthy mentioned. I will ask for that information and get it to the Member as soon as I can.

### A32 Upgrade

3. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what financial commitment he has made to the upgrading of the A32, given its importance as a key transport corridor between Omagh and the new acute hospital in Enniskillen. (AQO 2228/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The investment delivery plan for roads, published in April 2008, included a package of realignment and widening improvements on the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen at an estimated cost of £10 million. That 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 that important road that will serve the new acute hospital in Enniskillen.

Improvements to the A32 at Mossfield and Thornhill have been carried out, and a further scheme at Mullaghbane is under construction. Consultants are preparing road-improvement schemes at Esker Bog between Dromore and Irvinestown, and at Sidaire between Irvinestown and Enniskillen. Roads Service anticipates that those schemes will be delivered prior to the opening of the new acute hospital.

Consultants are also preparing further schemes along that road at locations between Omagh and Dromore, between Dromore and Irvinestown, and between Irvinestown and Enniskillen. However, Roads Service anticipates that due to the statutory procedures that have to be followed, those schemes will not be delivered until after the opening of the new acute hospital.

**Mr Buchanan:** Following the Health Minister's recent decision to remove all acute services from the Tyrone County Hospital, can the Minister inform the House what meetings the Health Minister has had with him and his Department to highlight the need for the A32 to be upgraded as a matter of urgency, given that it is the key transport corridor from Omagh to Enniskillen and the road that will be used to get all critically-ill patients to the new hospital in Enniskillen?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The importance of the road — particularly given the location of the hospital — has been acknowledged by the fact that the Department of Health has made available to Roads Service £5 million for road improvement schemes between Omagh and Enniskillen.

I have been corresponding with Minister McGimpsey about the A32, and I assure the Member that I will continue to keep Minister McGimpsey informed of progress and of any significant changes to the timescale for implementing road improvements on the A32. That correspondence is ongoing. The Department of Health's interest in the issue is reflected in the contribution that it has made to the road improvement.

**Mr Doherty:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My colleague Tom Buchanan anticipated my supplementary question. That is an indication of how closely we work in West Tyrone.

### Train Connections – Derry/Londonderry/Dublin Enterprise

4. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he plans to take to ensure that rail travellers departing from Derry/Londonderry on the first train can connect with the Dublin Enterprise without undue delay. (AQO 2229/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Timetable changes are operational matters, which are the responsibility of NITHCo and Translink. In December 2008, Translink cancelled the 5.35 am train from Derry. Translink informed me that only one or two people use the 5.35 am train each week to connect with the 8.00 am Enterprise service to Dublin. Translink anticipates that the 6.35 am train will attract a higher number of passengers wishing to travel from Derry to Belfast, thus making the service more viable.

Translink also informed me of the alternatives for people leaving Derry early in the morning with a view to travelling to Dublin. The Goldline Express service 212 leaves Foyle Street in Derry every 15 minutes from 5.30 am; the 5.30 am and 5.45 am departures arrive in Belfast at 7.20 am and 7.35 am and provide connection opportunities with the 8.00 am Enterprise.

Alternatively, Ulsterbus operates a 24/7 direct coach service between Derry and Dublin — service number 274 — with early morning departures at 12.45 am, 4.15 am and 6.15 am, and arrival times in Dublin at 4.10 am, 8.15 am and 10.15 am respectively.

2.45 pm

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Minister for his reply. The Minister will be aware of the ongoing campaign and lobby to have a cross-border railway connection between Donegal and the north-west. Will the Minister outline any detailed discussions that he has had with his counterpart in the Irish Government and indicate whether — at the risk of using a cliché — there is any light at the end of the tunnel?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am very aware of the lobby for railway provision in the north-west, on both the Derry side and the Donegal side of the border. The Member will be aware that the Northern Corridor Railways Group is conducting a study that my Department has funded. We have discussed the matter with the Minister for Transport at meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. The Member will also be aware of the substantial budget issues, particularly in the South, which will affect our ability to make progress on the issue.

I have had the opportunity to meet people not only from councils on the northern side, but from Donegal County Council also, to discuss their ideas in relation to the issue. I have encouraged them to develop their ideas and will continue to do so, so that when the economic situation improves, hopefully they will have advanced some plans and designs and will be able to make a substantial case for railway improvement in the north-west. I accept the argument that the north-west is the last remaining part of Ireland without a significant service, a problem that cuts across the western counties in this region and Sligo and Donegal as well. I am sympathetic to that case, and I advise those involved in pursuing it to continue to do so.

**Mr Moutray:** The Minister may be aware that recently the chief executive of Craigavon Borough Council requested a meeting with the chief executive of Translink, Mrs Catherine Mason, in relation to the proposed rebuilding of Portadown railway station and the difficulties at the Lurgan crossing on the Belfast to Dublin line. Given that the chief executive of Translink has refused to meet Craigavon Borough Council to discuss those important issues, will the Minister give an undertaking to use his influence to try to correct that situation?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I was not aware that the chief executive had refused the request for a meeting; I do not know the reasons for that and I am happy to take the matter up with her. I have had the opportunity to visit Lurgan and look at

the railway crossing there, and I am aware of the difficulties that the train service coming through Lurgan poses to traffic progression in the town. Recently, I visited the new facility in south Belfast, where there is a very high-tech operation of all the crossings and signalling right along the railway network, and I raised the issue of Lurgan and asked about the ability to make progress with the length of time that the barriers have to come down and stop traffic while the train comes through. Obviously, safety is a priority consideration for Translink in its operation of all such services. I was not aware of the issue between Craigavon Borough Council and the chief executive of Translink; I am happy to take that matter up with Mrs Mason and to talk to Craigavon Borough Council myself.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Further to his answer to Pat Ramsey's question, will the Minister take this opportunity to outline what proposals he has for increased rail provision on the Derry line and how he intends to address that issue?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member, like other Members, will be aware that I lifted the investment ban in relation to the Derry line when I came into office. Work on that line is ongoing in the areas of Ballymena and Ballymoney. There is a planned investment on the line between Coleraine and Derry at an estimated cost of £70 million, which will create a passing loop. The intention is to speed up the train service between Belfast and Derry and allow commuters to arrive in Derry before 9.00 am for the first time in many years. Therefore, improvements along that line are planned.

There is also an intention to buy a new batch of trains that will be entered into the system. Two additional trains will be deployed on the Derry line, to enable increased services and capacity on that line. Therefore, there are a number of capital projects happening, all of which will lead to improved frequency and an improved service on the Belfast to Derry line.

**Mr K Robinson:** What action is the Minister taking to enhance the viability of both the Londonderry and Larne lines? Does he accept that the journey times between Belfast and Londonderry, and the quality and age of the rolling stock on the Larne line, are detrimental to the potential of both to offer the public a sustainable alternative transport option?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I outlined in my previous response, substantial capital has been invested in the Belfast/Derry line to improve the passing loop; and track relaying is ongoing. Substantial investment in the Belfast/Derry line is ongoing, and has been planned for the next few years,

which will improve the service. I referred to the purchase of a new batch of trains. Members — particularly from East Antrim — have consistently raised with me the issue of the quality of the train service on the Larne line. As I told them previously, that new batch of trains will allow us to improve the quality of the rolling stock on the Larne line, which will lead to an increase in passenger numbers.

The Member will be pleased to know that passenger numbers have increased steadily and are substantially up on previous years. The service is improving, but there is still a long way to go. However, we will be investing capital in the railway system and in trying to improve services further as we acquire the finances.

### Translink Passenger Charter

5. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has held with Translink in relation to the upcoming review of the passenger charter. (AQO 2230/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Translink passengers' charter was reviewed in 2007, and the latest version was launched on 8 September 2008 at the official opening of the new bus station in Lisburn, which I attended. The passengers' charter is not due to be reviewed again until 2011. My officials will be in discussion with Translink and the Consumer Council closer to that time.

**Mr McCallister:** Does the Minister agree that for passengers at bus stops along a route the current charter is highly unsatisfactory given that it only requires buses to begin and end their journeys on time, and that the times for the stops in between are a rough estimate?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I compliment the Member and his fellow Member on their dress choice today. They are almost all in uniform.

**Mr Kennedy:** We never wore a uniform.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** He is more of an irregular. *[Interruption.]*

As regards the passengers' charter, a similar standard applies in Britain and Ireland: it is an attempt to try and improve services. I refer back to my answer to the previous question; the number of people using public transport has been increasing steadily. Satisfaction rates with the service provided, punctuality and fares are at levels where the passengers' charter estimates they should be, and if there are ways to improve on those, I am happy to do so.

The Department talks to the Consumer Council about the targets in the passengers' charter, and the results that come from that, which quite vociferously represent the interests of consumers across the region to ensure that they get the best services possible. I do

not doubt that there are issues that people can challenge and say that improvements can be made. Improvements can always be made to any service. However, the charter is comparable to charters and standards set elsewhere. Standards and targets are being met, and the number of people using public transport is increasing.

**Mr Boylan:** A LeasCheann Comhairle, what role does the Minister play in the review of the passengers charter? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I said, Translink undertakes periodic reviews of the charter, and my Department is involved in that. However, it is important from a consumer protection point of view that the Consumer Council is involved in the review of the passengers' charter. Standards can always be improved, and efforts should be made to continuously improve standards. The targets set in the passengers' charter, and the level of achievement of those targets, measure comparably with other areas, and the number of people using public transport is increasing.

**Mr P J Bradley:** A passengers' charter would certainly benefit passengers in rural areas. Does the Minister agree that free travel for senior citizens in rural areas is somewhat of a misnomer, given that the rural services lack connectivity with major road and rail services and their timetables?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** If the Member has specific issues in relation to South Down where there is no connectivity, I would be happy to hear from him and see where Translink can improve.

I have not been made aware of any issues, and, as rural dweller, I appreciate that there are issues around public-transport provision, which we must always strive to improve. To that end, additional community-travel schemes have been introduced in rural areas. However, if there are specific timetabling concerns, resulting in a lack of connectivity, I am happy to hear from the Member and to raise those matters with Translink.

### Traffic Volumes

6. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact on traffic volumes that shoppers from the Republic of Ireland will have, in Newry, Enniskillen and Derry/Londonderry. (AQO 2231/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Members will be aware of the influx of traffic that shoppers from the South have caused in recent months. The effect of that extra traffic is felt most strongly in Newry, while the major junctions of Gaol Square, Henry Street and

the Wellington Road throughpass in Enniskillen have been experiencing increased traffic congestion.

However, there has been no significant effect on traffic volumes in Derry, over and above that normally experienced, and it is not envisaged that that will change. My Department does not have precise details of the increase in traffic volumes owing to the influx of shoppers from the South, but an estimated rise of 30% to 40% in Newry's traffic volumes since December appears reasonable. Although it is expected that shoppers from the South will continue to travel to the North in search of savings, the economic climate will dictate the strength and duration of their interest.

**Mr Simpson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Where improvements can be made to alleviate town-centre traffic difficulties, will the Minister state that his Department will consider them, even if only as a temporary measure — by direction signage or whatever — in order to take pressure away from town centres?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I agree absolutely with the Member. In a sense, it is a good problem to have. Being a border dweller, I am aware of times when traffic volumes moved in the other direction in search of bargains. The current favourable rates mean that traffic volumes are increasing in towns on the Northern side of the border.

I am happy to work with people to provide, as the Member suggests, temporary solutions where they are required. In the run-up to the Christmas shopping period in Newry, I sat down with traders and with representatives from the council, PSNI, Roads Service and Housing Executive — it had property that was subsequently used as a temporary car park — and we were able to come up with a range of measures. Although those measures did not completely do away with the traffic issues, they alleviated them in some small regard. For example, providing better signage at the Newry bypass made people aware that there was more than one entrance to the town, and meant that not everyone tried to use the Dublin Road.

Where that is the case in other towns, a multi-agency approach to even temporary measures is advisable, because pieces of land that are awaiting development or that will lie unused for a couple can often be used as makeshift car parks. It just so happens that I represent the Newry area, so I was able to meet people to discuss the issues, but a local-level approach to get together Roads Service, the Housing Executive, the council, PSNI and traders to consider solutions can be very effective in the short term.

**Mr Gardiner:** Will the Minister update the House on the likely completion date for the new dual-carriageway bypass for Newry?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As someone who travels past it every day, I can assure the Member

that work is progressing quite well. The completion date is the end of next year — winter 2010. I am not sure whether any sections of the road will be opened before then. I have asked that question of Roads Service, and I am waiting for an answer. If there is a further interim update, I will provide it to the Member.

However, work is progressing well. No significant delays have been experienced, and the anticipated completion date remains the winter of next year.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware that Amey Lagan Ferroviai intends to close, from 7.00 pm on Friday 20 March until 6.00 am on Monday 23 March, the Forkhill Road at the Cloghogue roundabout during the construction of the new dual carriageway? During that weekend, confirmation will be taking place in the local church. Will the Minister assure the House that, whatever closure is necessary, the local community's views will be taken into account, and that a time of least inconvenience will be chosen?

I further ask the Minister to ensure that traffic is managed in such a way as to avoid long tailbacks, such as we had at Christmas, from Newry's Dublin Road to the part of the new motorway that is open.

Will the Minister work with the Department for Social Development (DSD) to ameliorate the impact of the A1 dual carriageway on neighbourhood-renewal areas bordering the new road? Go raibh míle maith agat. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I assure the Members to my left that I am more than able to do this job.

3.00 pm

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am aware of the proposed closure of Forkhill Road at the Cloghogue roundabout. No road closure occurs without some inconvenience, but the Member is quite right: there should be liaison and discussions with the local community to try to minimise that inconvenience as best we can.

From discussions that I have had with the chairperson of the local liaison group — who co-ordinates meetings among the council, Roads Service, the contractor and the local community — I am aware that an evening is planned to provide information to the local community and to take suggestions. Where road closures are planned, every effort should be made to ensure that the inevitable inconvenience will be minimised. If traffic-management issues arise from closures, they should be managed as sensibly as possible in order to alleviate any possible traffic congestion.

## AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Single Farm Payments

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, as of 20 February 2009, how many farmers are still to receive single farm payments. (AQO 2246/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):** To date, my Department has paid out £230·7 million to 36,123 farmers, which is 93·2% of farmers who claimed single farm payments in 2008. About 6·8% of claims — or 2,631 — have not been finalised for a variety of reasons, including queries on the claims; the need to complete the processing of on-farm inspection reports; challenges by others of the right to claim the land, including duplicated fields; the need to await probates; or because farmers have not provided bank-account details to allow payments to be made by electronic transfer.

Not all of the remaining claims will be due a payment. That is because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules. I am pleased that the Department has again improved its payment performance this year, and it will seek to improve that further.

**Mr Irwin:** In some cases, inspections of farms did not take place until December 2008. In fact, by that time, most payments were due to be made. Will the Minister explain why inspections were held back until so late in the year?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** As the Member knows, there are a number of on-farm inspections. Obviously, we must take a line from the European Commission as to how many inspections we carry out and when we do them. However, we must deal with a situation where people have been pulled in to do other work, such as carrying out inspections for the farm nutrient management scheme, in order to pay that money as quickly as possible.

We are trying to manage resources as best we can. We try to ensure that we perform all inspections on time, and we try to ensure that farmers who are waiting for inspections are not disadvantaged regarding payment.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Minister for her initial reply. Since the inception of the scheme, how much single farm payment money has been unspent for various reasons and has been returned to the European Union?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I do not have that figure with me today, but I am happy to provide it in writing.

**Mr Burns:** Does the Minister agree that the map-checking facility that is offered on a first-come, first-served basis could disadvantage some landowners who may not be able to use it in time?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** We are very keen to ensure that as many applicants as possible are paid as early as possible — whether they are inspection cases or not. My Department is taking steps that will enable it to complete its eligibility inspections earlier this year.

Within the past two weeks, I issued an open invitation to farmers to come into our offices to check their maps with the help of aerial photography. Farmers who ensure that their maps are accurate and up to date — and who ensure that they do not claim on ineligible land — are more likely to have clear inspections, so we need the farmers to meet us halfway on the issue. Farmers and the Department have to work together to make further improvements. However, there is scope for farmers to come into our offices, check their maps and ensure that they are giving us the right information.

**Mr Molloy:** When will the rest of the farmers receive their 2008 payments?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Although I cannot specify when individual cases will be cleared for payment, my Department has made more payments in 2008 at an earlier stage than it did in 2007, and it will continue to make payments as quickly as possible. We exceeded our February targets by completing 92·8% of payments by the end of February, and our target for the end of March 2009 is to complete 95% of claims. Some of the outstanding claims might not receive a payment because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules.

Another difficulty is that about 250 farmers have not supplied us with bank details for the purposes of electronic transfer. To help farmers who do not have a bank account to receive their payments, I secured the facility whereby payments can be paid into a credit union, provided that the credit union operates a bank account. Therefore, if those 250 farmers could find a way to get their details to us, we could pay them and take their names off the list.

### Rural Development Programme

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the environmental aspects of the rural development programme. (AQO 2247/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The environmental aspects of the rural

development programme are delivered through measure 2.2 of the agrienvironment programme. Last June, I launched two key elements of the measure — the new countryside management scheme and the new organic farming scheme. Both schemes opened last year, and as a result, about 1,300 countryside management scheme applications and 40 organic farming scheme applications are being processed.

**Mr McCarthy:** As regards grants for woodland areas, the Programme for Government sets ambitious targets for the creation of new woodlands throughout Northern Ireland. As I understand it, at present, only one third of the targets has been achieved. What action is the Minister taking to improve that situation and to deliver on the Programme for Government?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The Member is right: the targets for the expansion of woodland are ambitious. We are exploring a number of issues to help us to achieve those targets. The answer is very long and detailed, and if the Minister is content, I would be happy to supply it in writing.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am not a Minister. *[Laughter.]*

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Sorry, I meant Member — you never know; someday, Kieran. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am sure that Mr McCarthy would not object to that.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can I ask the Minister how many applications were received to each scheme?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am pleased to say that there was a high degree of interest in both schemes. We received about 4,500 applications to the new countryside management scheme, and 102 applications to the organic farming scheme.

**Mr McCallister:** Given that there have been various indications of timescales over the past 16 months, when will money be delivered to projects under axis 3 of the rural development programme?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** We have had to prioritise applications and consider where they are from. Some 1,300 applications have been designated and are being progressed at the moment. I hope, in the next few weeks, to make an announcement on when those applications will start under the countryside management scheme, and when we will be able to pay out. We are looking carefully at budgets, and we want to be able to pay that money as soon as we can.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 3 has been withdrawn; Mr McGlone is not in his place to ask

question 4; and question 5 has been withdrawn. I call Mr Jim Shannon to ask question 6.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Question 6 was one of the questions that was grouped alongside questions 4 and 7, so with the permission of the Deputy Speaker, I will answer all those questions together, as they are all on the same issue.

**Farm Modernisation Scheme**

6. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applications for farm modernisation grants have been received and accepted, and how much funding has been set aside for the scheme. (AQO 2251/09)

7. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what official clearance the European Union gave her Department to proceed with the farm modernisation scheme on a first-come, first-served basis. (AQO 2252/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** As regards whether the Department sought EU clearance on how it proceeded with applications under the farm modernisation scheme, EU rules associated with implementing rural development programmes do not oblige the Department to seek clearance from the European Commission on either selection criteria or operational matters. Consequently, the Department did not seek clearance from the Commission for its system for receiving applications on the basis of first come, first served. The Department is obliged to consult the rural development programme's monitoring committee on the scheme selection criteria, and it has done so.

Turning to operational issues, I praise the staff concerned for their huge efforts in receipting the applications. Within four hours of the programme opening, more than 5,000 applications had been received and receipted, indicating that the systems in place were well resourced and that staff were effectively trained to deal with the uptake. Although I did not have any personal contact with my the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) offices in relation to the farm modernisation programme before 17 February 2009, I had asked my officials to assure me that all endeavours had been made to ensure that staff were well trained and confident enough to undertake the exercise, and that was certainly borne out by performance on the day.

By close of business on 6 March, more than 9,000 applications had been received, and a total of £15.25 million has been set aside over the lifetime of the farm modernisation programme.

Finally, where do we go from here? My officials have been working closely with the European Commission and will continue to do so until the issue is resolved.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for that response. However, it is clear from the publicity surrounding the issue that many people are unhappy that they were unable to attend the offices to qualify for the money. For that reason, what steps does the Minister intend to take to assist those people who were unable to attend because of work and other commitments? Furthermore, is there any intention to review the criteria for all those people who wish to be considered for grants? The grant amounts to £5,000, which is not a lot, but it enables many farmers to modernise their machinery and deal with other issues on their farm. However, there are concerns about the fact that they were unable to attend, and there are also concerns about the criteria.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The issue has been well aired in the media in the past few weeks, and as Members know, I had some concerns about people queuing overnight and what that would look like. I was very keen that farmers did not feel the need to queue. We brought in a number of measures to help people who were unable to queue because they were working or had poor mobility problems. Therefore, each person who queued was allowed to bring three forms to the office that morning, and that enabled them to help out other people. Everyone has friends or neighbours who could have taken the form in for them. Therefore, we tried to look at ways in which we could help the people to whom the Member is referring. A postal application system was also in place to help people with poor mobility problems.

We fully intend to review all the issues for the second and third tranches. Indeed, on the morning of 17 February, I said that I would review the farm modernisation programme and how it would proceed on the next tranche.

I heard a lovely story from a farmer in my area, who said that he did not realise that people were queuing, until his neighbour, who is Catholic, phoned him to tell him that people were queuing outside the office in Thomas Street in Dungannon. His neighbour asked him whether he was going to submit a form, and he said that he could not get to the office because he had something else on, so the Catholic farmer joined the queue. Then, at around midnight, he swapped places with his Protestant neighbour. Therefore, between them and another farmer, they took turns in the queue and submitted their three forms.

That story is enough to warm the cockles of your heart, and it shows how people co-operated with one another in order to submit their forms, and how those three farmers who could not queue all night worked

together and submitted their forms. Therefore, we have heard some very good stories, but we want to review the process to ensure that the best system is in place.

We were supposed to open the programme in October 2008, but we put it off until February 2009, with a view to trying to get a better scheme in place. With the best will in the world, that better system did not materialise. Nevertheless, we want to review the system to ensure that the second and third tranches are done in a different way. However, we are dealing with a scheme that is highly popular and vastly oversubscribed. If we had £30 million, we would want to invest it in the programme, because there is a clear indication that even in these difficult economic times, farmers are willing to put their money into the rural economy.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Surely that qualifies for a cross-community grant alone, Minister. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Poots:** Question 7.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Should the Member not be asking a supplementary question?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member's question was grouped, so I call him for a supplementary question.

3.15 pm

**Mr Poots:** I want clarification on why we did not have the scheme cleared by Brussels in the first instance. It is all right to say that we did not need to do that, but, ultimately, our problem is that Brussels has stated that it has real issues with what happened. Will the Minister clear the money so that it can go to farmers without the support of Brussels, as her answer to the initial question seemed to indicate? If not, what assurances has she received that we will be able to proceed with the scheme as it has been set out?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** We worked closely with Brussels in the run-up to the scheme. After the misunderstanding on 17 February, I sought legal advice on whether our scheme met EU legislative requirements. That advice stated that our interpretation of the EU regulation is a reasonable one. In other words, the scheme meets the requirements of the EU legislation.

However, I am mindful of the issues involved with a protracted legal discussion with the European Commission, and I wish to avoid such a situation if possible. My officials continue to work with the Commission; I am hopeful that the issues can be resolved and that we can apply the scheme as planned.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Thank you. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to postal applications in an earlier response. Will she give us a breakdown of the number of postal applications that were made as opposed to those that were received under the counter — sorry, over the counter? *[Laughter.]*

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I thank the Member for his question. To my knowledge, no applications were received under the counter. *[Laughter.]* At the close of business on 6 March, we had almost 3,000 postal applications out of a total of 9,000 applications. Therefore, the ratio of over-the-counter applications to postal applications was about 2:1.

**Mr Elliott:** I was intrigued by the Minister's wee story about what happened in Dungannon. I could tell her a few stories about what happened on that night and morning, but they are not repeatable here.

Did the Minister or the Department have any indication prior to the farm modernisation programme going live that the application process may not be acceptable or approved by the European authorities?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** In February 2008, there was correspondence with all member states about the need to include selection criteria in rural development schemes in order to ensure that operational objectives and priorities are met. In October 2008, the Department consulted the rural development programme monitoring committee about the selection criteria for the farm modernisation programme in accordance with EU rules. The European Commission did not offer any comments on the criteria throughout that process, and, subsequently, we thought that our scheme was fully compliant.

Up until lunchtime on 17 February, we were working with Commission officials to explain our selection process and to provide whatever reassurances they sought; we were certainly not aware that they had issues. I said on 17 February that the situation was a misunderstanding, and, ultimately, I think that it will be recognised to have been a misunderstanding.

I presume that parliamentary privilege applies to questions for oral answer, so I would be pleased to hear the Member's stories if he wishes to share them with me.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Is the Minister saying that Michael Mann — Mariann Fischer Boel's European Commission spokesman on agriculture and rural development — is wrong?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The question was whether our scheme was legal or illegal. I do not believe that Michael Mann said that the scheme was illegal, but that is how it was portrayed by the media. I assure the Member that the scheme is not illegal; no moneys have been paid out under the scheme, and, therefore, there is no question of disallowance.

The Commission maintained that additional selection criteria are needed to ensure that we meet the operational objectives and priorities of the measures.

We consider that we have a selection process in place that meets those needs, hence the difference of opinion or the misunderstanding that arose. I believe that those issues can be resolved.

## **Rural Development Programme**

8. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the rural life aspects of the rural development programme. (AQO 2253/09)

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I interpret the Member's question as a reference to the axis 3 quality of life measures, which will invest £100 million into rural areas over the course of the new rural development programme. I am pleased to report that very substantial progress has been made in putting in place administrative structures for the implementation of the axis.

The assessment of the strategy was completed on 15 January 2009, and all the joint council committees were informed of their full allocations on 19 January 2009. Already, one area has opened calls for applications, and interest has been high. At last count, over 370 applications for the first two measures were received. Three other areas have asked for expressions of interest, and I am pleased to report again that interest has been high. The remaining cluster areas are at an advanced stage and will also shortly open for expressions of interest.

Availability of credit is important to the rural economy and the agricultural industry, and I intend to have an early meeting with the major local banks to impress upon them the concerns of the rural community and to seek to gain an understanding of how they are responding to concerns.

**Mr Neeson:** I thank the Minister for her response. Last year, a large number of applicants were turned down for the countryside management scheme. What plans has the Minister to reopen the scheme and, if she does so, will she publish the criteria well in advance?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Countryside management is a phased-in scheme. We cannot take everyone who applies in the first year. This year, we hope to be able to process about 1,300 applications. Those who have already applied have no need to reapply; we will phase those applications in over the lifetime of the countryside management scheme. We wanted to ensure that we obtained best value for money and maximised the impact of the scheme, so we looked at areas that had a definition such as Ramsar, Geopark, area of special scientific interest (ASSI) or area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) in order to maximise the environmental impact of the countryside management scheme.

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

I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she tell us the timescale for money to be allocated to that scheme?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Interest is high in the scheme. One local action group has already received 374 applications.

At present, each joint council committee is the administrative and lead financial actor for its respective local action group and has been provided with a draft of the contract that my Department wishes to enter into for implementation of axis 3. We will move as fast as possible. Once a joint council committee has signed its contract, it can begin to issue letters of offer.

**Mr Armstrong:** Will the Minister inform the House whether all application processes have been cleared by the European Union authorities for rural development programme measures?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Under the 'Improving the Quality of Life in Rural Areas and Diversification of the Rural Economy' axis, we wanted to ensure a bottom-up approach. There are seven clusters that identify the needs of their own areas, and they do the work on the ground. The best people to know what the money should be spent on are people from those areas. We work with the local action groups and the joint council committees in a community effort to ensure that the money goes into the cluster areas for tourism, economic creation, village renewal or whatever purpose. They will tell us where the money will best be spent.

## Farm Diversification

9. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made of the positive aspects of farm diversification.

(AQO 2254/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Under the 2001-06 rural development programme, apart from the farm diversification challenge, there was no specific farm diversification measure. However, many farmers availed themselves of funding and training opportunities to turn skills and business ideas into income-generating activities and businesses that supplemented the farm income. In the course of the programme, substantial support was drawn down by the farm diversification project and various relevant training measures through both the LEADER+ and Building Sustainable Prosperity programmes.

The Peace II programme invested over £6 million in farm diversification. Under measure 5.6b of that

programme, a further €3 million was invested in agriculture and rural development co-operation of a cross-border diversification nature. In the course of my work, I have seen many diversification businesses: I have seen everything from tourism activities, such as paintball and fun farms, to micro businesses manufacturing waste-paper compacters, components for buses and hurley sticks. I am greatly impressed by the innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship of the farming community, whether that is through the establishment of a small tourist activity business that enhances the Irish tourist offering, or through the establishment of a small engineering business that targets a niche market.

Therefore, under measure 3.1 of axis 3 of the new RDP, I have set aside a budget of £20 million —  
[Interruption.]

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Minister cannot be heard.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Therefore, under measure 3.1 of axis 3 of the new RDP, I have set aside a budget of £20 million, specifically for farm diversification projects. That will provide additional income and help families to stay in farming. The £20 million budget set aside for farm diversification is almost equal to the £21 million total budget for the previous LEADER+ programme.

**Mr Doherty:** A LeasCheann Comhairle, I thank the Minister for her reply. Can farm families apply for assistance under any other axis 3 measure?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Yes; in addition to the £20 million available under the farm diversification measure, farm family members who wish to pursue projects off-farm can, within axis 3, apply for assistance under micro business development and tourism. That will help to maximise opportunities for farmers and farm family members, and give them access to a further budget of £32 million. It is hoped that that can contribute toward the job creation target associated with that funding of 600 new jobs.

**Mr Beggs:** Farm diversification schemes are becoming increasingly important to enable farmers to remain close to their stock. As a result of reduced farm incomes, they have been forced to go wider afield. Will the Minister confirm what actions she has taken, involving other Departments, to assist a greater level of success for farm diversification schemes?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The key policy plank of my time as Minister is the bringing forward of a rural White Paper. I hope that that will be the vehicle and the mechanism through which we will engage all other Departments to help us in improving the quality of life for rural dwellers. Such issues will impact upon farm

diversification. The Member is right; we need to see other Departments working with us to ensure the success and sustainability of those small businesses.

### Sheep: Double Tagging

10. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made of the consequences facing flock owners when the double tagging identification of sheep is introduced.

(AQO 2255/09)

#### The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

**Development:** Due to our specific circumstances — not least, the unique trade in sheep to and from the South — I believe that moving to double tagging, in line with the system in place in Britain, would not be in the best interests of the local sheep industry. For that reason, I believe that the most productive and cost-effective option for us is to move directly to the electronic identification (EID) of sheep. Under European legislation, that has to be introduced throughout the European Union by the end of the year.

In 2008, I went to Brussels, where I had meetings with Commissioner Fischer Boel and Commissioner Vassiliou on the identification and movement of sheep. The Commissioners recognised the unique position of the North, and supported my approach in moving directly to EID.

I understand that many flock keepers are concerned at the effect that electronic identification will have. There certainly will be challenges for the industry in achieving a successful introduction of the system. However, it is worth noting that for many flock keepers, electronic identification of sheep could be as simple as applying electronic tags and continuing to record information manually.

Under EU legislation, keepers have the choice of whether they wish to record information electronically. I do not expect keepers with a small number of sheep to buy and use electronic readers. We have had successful EU negotiations that secured several transitional arrangements. Those have reduced the burden of electronic identification on keepers, in particular, by phasing in individual recording requirements between 2010 and 2012, and lessening the future record-keeping burden on sheep born before the end of the year.

My officials will continue to work closely with the authorities in the South, in Britain, and with the industry here, to design the most appropriate system for us. I am keen to reduce the burden on keepers as far as possible, while realising the opportunities that electronic identification presents.

3.30 pm

**Mr Gallagher:** Given that the double tagging of cattle has caused so many ongoing problems, which the Minister's Department is still trying to iron out, can she say whether, when she referred to the industry, she meant one or both of the unions? Has she met any representatives of the farming community other than the unions?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Minister, please give a quick response.

#### The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

**Development:** Obviously, I discuss such issues with the unions, but the Member is right to raise that point — I do not limit such discussions to the unions. Other organisations such as the National Sheep Association have been helpful in developing our proposals.

The Member talked about double tagging of cattle. I was keen not to go down the route of double tagging sheep. In January 2008, double tagging was introduced in England, Scotland and Wales. I felt that we would ultimately have to introduce electronic identification and that our keepers would otherwise have had to get used to two systems in a short period of time, so I tried to ensure that trade was kept on the island of Ireland and that no burden or barrier was placed on our keepers. I do engage directly with sheep farmers to get the best mechanism possible.

## CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

### Spectator Behaviour Issues

1. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support his Department has given to the Northern Ireland Office in the preparation of legislation to address spectator behaviour issues. (AQO 2266/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell):** Responsibility for the preparation of legislation to address spectator behaviour issues is a reserved matter and, therefore, rests with the Northern Ireland Office. Following representations by my predecessor, Edwin Poots MLA, the Northern Ireland Office agreed to work with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to produce an agreed package of proposals. My Department's officials have since assisted the NIO in that process, and a range of proposals has been agreed. I recently met the Criminal Justice Minister, Paul Goggins MP, and I asked him to publish those proposals for consultation as soon as possible.

**Mr Craig:** I thank the Minister for that. Can the Minister outline some of the offences that he believes

should be introduced? Should those offences include pitch invasions, such as those that we witnessed on Boxing Day 2008?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. He mentioned one of the types of offence that could be included. I shall keep that in context, however, by pointing out that sporting involvement and events in Northern Ireland are, by and large, family-friendly leisure pursuits. The type of disgraceful and unfortunate scenes that took place over the Christmas holidays and to which the honourable Member referred are very irregular and seldom witnessed. However, they do occur on a few occasions.

The legislation could well address: unauthorised pitch incursions; offensive chanting; missile throwing; the bringing of bottles, flares and fireworks into grounds; restrictions on the carrying or drinking of alcohol on special public transport, either on the way to or from designated matches; ticket touting; and a football-banning-order regime in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister recognise the fact that the behaviour of spectators at GAA matches is and always has been exemplary?

**Mr Kennedy:** It is the players who are the problem.

**Mr McKay:** Does he believe that other sports could look at how they could learn from that example?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I notice that a number of Members referred from sedentary positions to the behaviour of players not being up to mark in comparison with spectators. In some sports, players set a good example for spectators, but, from some of the sedentary comments, it appears that the opposite is the case on a small number of occasions. A small number of GAA players could take lessons and take their lead from the behaviour of spectators at the games, which the honourable Member outlined.

**Mrs M Bradley:** Will the Minister outline which teams' spectators are most associated statistically with public-order offences? Can he outline the work that the Department has done with those teams and their spectators' groups to end such behaviour?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for her question, which, as regards analysing those spectators who may have more work to do, is almost impossible to answer. Several clubs have looked at ways to ensure that their grounds are more prepared for spectator safety in order to try to foster a more family-friendly atmosphere, which, in turn, leads to even less likelihood of problems either at or inside grounds, or leaving them.

I am not aware, therefore, of the statistics on those clubs that may have more work to do which the

honourable Member has asked me to outline. However, I am certainly interested in obtaining any information that is required in order to take whatever steps need to be taken to assist those clubs to develop further their policies.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 2 has been withdrawn.

### Irish League Football Clubs

3. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the contribution made by the local Irish League football clubs to their local communities. (AQO 2268/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Irish League football clubs make a significant contribution to local communities in many towns and cities in Northern Ireland. Irish League football has a long tradition of being played and supported by people from all sections of the community. In addition, clubs have contributed to community relations programmes and the development of grassroots football programmes, the aim of which is to encourage more young people in local communities, including those who are under-represented in sport, to play and become involved in football.

**Mr Simpson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he outline the evidence that exists about the contribution of Irish League clubs to local communities? Does he agree that youth academies are of great benefit, not only in maximising clubs' potential, but also in encouraging young people into the sporting arena?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** There is certainly plenty of evidence of the long tradition of participation by clubs in community-based football initiatives, including 'Football for All' and the Irish Football Association's (IFA) grassroots youth strategy. The Member referred to youth academies; I am sure that he was alluding to a recent visit that he and I made to Mourneview Park, the home of Glenavon Football Club, where there is a youth academy that is —

**Mr Kennedy:** We are talking about football. [Laughter.]

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I will resist the temptation to respond to that and look forward to the semi-final of a certain competition that is coming up shortly.

To get back to the more serious matters of the moment; Glenavon Football Club runs a football academy in which 120 to 130 young people are involved at various levels. It is an excellent example. I am aware that other academies are run by Crusaders, Coleraine, Cliftonville, Glentoran and Linfield, to name but a few. I may, unfortunately, have overlooked some others.

**Mr Brolly:** Does the Minister agree that all sporting organisations make valuable contributions to their local communities, particularly those that rely mainly, if not exclusively, on voluntary support and input?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Yes, I agree that they do to a greater or lesser degree.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Minister for his earlier answers. As Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, will he join me in congratulating Waringstown Primary School on its fine achievement of being named junior school choir of the year for a second time? The fact that my brother is the school's principal is, of course, not related at all.

I also ask the Minister to publicly acknowledge the huge contribution that is made by Irish League soccer clubs such as Linfield — and, indeed, the Irish Football Association — in their efforts to encourage soccer at grassroots level and community involvement.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I never cease to marvel at the ingenuity with which some Members manage to raise issues. Although important and relevant, I am sure, their significance or connection to the original question totally escapes me. However, I am sure that tremendous work has been done at Waringstown Primary School, and I commend everyone who contributed to that.

The Member asked about the IFA and clubs such as Linfield. In the past 10 or 15 years, a range of clubs have, undoubtedly, taken considerable steps that have been beneficial and have facilitated considerable improvements to not just the clubs but to the communities in which they are based. The 10% or 11% increase in attendances at Irish League football matches is indicative of the good work that is being done by a range of clubs. I hope that such work continues, and my Department will, of course, do all that it can to enable all clubs to make their sport even more widely available to communities that should be supporting those sports.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am sure, Mr Kennedy, that your brother will be well pleased that you raised that important issue.

### Schooner 'Result'

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the future plans of the National Museums in relation to the presentation and display of the schooner 'Result'. (AQO 2269/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Result is a three-masted, top-sailed schooner — which is not easy to say — that was built by Paul Rodgers and Company in Carrickfergus in 1893. The ship is important because of her design, her provenance as one

of the last surviving nineteenth-century Irish-built merchant vessels, and, of course, her period.

In 1999, the National Historic Ships Committee designated the Result as being of pre-eminent significance and part of the UK's core collection of historic vessels. National Museums Northern Ireland recognises the position of the Result, and is committed to not only developing and preserving maritime collections but also to making them accessible to the widest range of audiences. In that context, National Museums intends to develop a 10-year capital strategy that will include options for the display of maritime and industrial history collections. The Result is currently protected under a purpose-built weatherproof awning.

**Mr Neeson:** I thank the Minister for his answer. As he probably knows, I am no longer on the board of the National Museums of Northern Ireland. However, I am a member of the National Historic Ships Committee.

The Result was brought back to Northern Ireland in 1970, and I always hoped that she would be fully restored. I am glad to say that she has joined SS Nomadic and HMS Caroline on the core collection of national historic ships. Will the Minister assure me that he will respond positively to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's report, which stated that there was a need to develop a policy for maritime heritage in Northern Ireland?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Northern Ireland's maritime history is, undoubtedly, magnificent, and the Member has a long-held interest in the Result and other issues. As he knows, I have discussed how to implement a museums policy with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and I am currently considering the best way to do so. I know that a strategy has been outlined as one of the best ways to proceed. I will examine that matter with the issues that the Member and others have drawn to my attention firmly in mind as to how we best proceed.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Jonathan Ross to ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Ross:** I am not quite Jonathan Ross, Mr Deputy Speaker — just Alastair will do it. [*Laughter.*] I will, in any case, resist courting controversy in my comments.

In his initial answer, the Minister spoke about the 10-year capital-development strategy for maritime and industrial collections. Will he inform the House whether he has any plans to include anything else in that? I am speaking specifically about the Nomadic and the Titanic collections.

3.45 pm

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I will respond to Alastair Ross, Mr Deputy Speaker. He referred to other areas in the collection, as did the

previous Member to speak. I will obviously have to look at any necessary business cases and at the availability of capital expenditure being approved by both my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The 10-year capital-development strategy to which I referred will focus on the maritime and industrial history collections that are held by national museums, but it will also be mindful of related and complementary objects that are held elsewhere. Of course, I cannot give a commitment at this stage, given the resource implications, but suffice it to say that I want to be very helpful to what is a significant and important part of our maritime history and background.

**Mr McNarry:** I am grateful to the Minister for his responses so far and for the probing questions. It is quite clear that what is being identified is a missing link, which is perhaps influenced by resources and the availability of funding, as the Minister said.

Given the maritime history of Belfast, will the Minister consider the incorporation of a spectacular, stand-alone maritime museum that includes not only the Titanic, but the wider history of shipbuilding in Belfast and other small shipbuilders from 1663 to the present?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, my Department will look at any issues, and he raised a particular one. I would have to see what the resource implication would be for that proposal, but the answer in principle is that, yes, I am prepared to look at it.

We need to build for the future. This August the fantastic display of the Tall Ships will be coming to Northern Ireland, and that will be an example of the past, of history and of a global scene coming to Northern Ireland. It will be an opportunity for us to project on an international scale the maritime history that we have here. The honourable Member made a suggestion that I am happy to follow up.

### **Elite Facilities Programme: Additional Funding**

5. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following his announcement on the proposed stadium at the Maze site, if he has sought additional funding from the Executive to provide additional resources for the elite facilities programme.

(AQO 2270/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I indicated my intention to defer major stadium expenditure and to bring forward a number of other high-priority sports capital programmes. I am currently considering the scope to reallocate at least some of the

funding in 2009-2010 and 2010-11, which was originally allocated for stadium development, by way of re-profiling the sports capital programme. That will include consideration not only of the budget requirements for the elite-facilities programme, but of competing pressures, such as stadia-safety issues and other pressures in my Department's capital programme.

That will ensure that, in the context of 2012, not only will Northern Ireland benefit from new facilities, but a range of existing facilities will be upgraded, thereby consolidating a strong legacy of benefit from the London Olympic Games. Sport NI is currently progressing stage two of the elite-facilities competition in order that the programme that emerges will be in the optimum position to benefit from available funding from the reallocation that I mentioned.

**Mr Burns:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he tell us how many funding applications for elite facilities have been received and shortlisted and how many of those facilities will be ready by 2012 for the Olympics?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for getting down to specifics. Obviously, we are still at an early stage, and I do not want to go into specifics about the final outcome of stage two of the elite-facilities programme. However, I can inform the Member of the sports that are covered by the applications.

The issue of the 50-metre swimming pool in north Down is in the public domain. Other sports involved include sailing, cycling, indoor and outdoor rowing, equestrianism, basketball, volleyball, indoor athletics and tennis. The Member will accept that that represents a wide range of sporting facilities.

I recently pressed Sport NI on the need to complete applications for all those facilities as quickly as possible. Sport NI has accepted that, and those applications will proceed through the next stage of the elite facilities programme. However, there are two crucial issues: first, as many of those facilities as possible should be in place and ready in advance of the 2012 Olympics; and, secondly, and more significantly, we must build on the legacy that the Olympics can leave, way beyond 2012, to athletes from Northern Ireland in a range of sports. Having those facilities will mean that there will be greater benefits in future. We shall have facilities that will allow our athletes to excel even more than is currently the case. We are doing well at the moment, but we can do even better in future.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Further to his answer to Thomas Burns's first question, will the Minister outline how he will proceed with the reallocation of the sports stadium money? Does he require approval

from any other Department, or indeed, from the Executive as a whole, to continue with that programme?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Member asks an interesting question, which is remarkably similar to the one that he asked me during a meeting of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on 26 February. I answered the question then, and I will do so again.

The Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure made provision for stadium development. The controversy surrounding the Maze stadium development had been around for a number of years. For understandable reasons, there had been a considerable delay, and when I came into office in June 2008, I was determined to move the project forward. I consulted the sporting bodies involved, visited the site and took a decision, which I relayed to Executive colleagues two months ago. I told them that I had decided not to proceed with the Maze stadium development, and that I wished to proceed by reallocating some of that money for projects that have to be undertaken in the next two or three years. If I do not reallocate the money that was earmarked for the existing stadium development, I will have no other immediately accessible funding with which to do that other work. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that if I do not reallocate that money, that work will not be done. That is why I intend to proceed as quickly as is practicable and possible to reallocate the funding.

**Mr Bresland:** How much funding will the Minister require for the elite facilities programme?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Member asks another pertinent question. At present, if we set aside the 50-metre pool, which was the subject of the first announcement, a further £38 million may be required. However, the exact amount that will be required will not become clear until a full assessment of business cases has taken place, and until the result of the stage-two competition for the elite facilities programme is announced. It is not possible to determine the exact amount of money that will be required, although we may be looking at a figure of £38 million.

**Mr K Robinson:** I am very interested in that sum of £38 million; can I help the Minister to spend it?

Can the Minister have some discussion with his ministerial colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning about the potential for local job creation at the University of Ulster campus at Jordanstown, particularly if the university decides to move many of its faculties to York Street? Could the existing elite sports facilities that are currently located at Jordanstown be built on?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for offering to help me to spend the

money; I am sure that there will be no shortage of people joining that particular queue. Again, I do not want to go into detail about the specific sites and terms of the next stage of the elite-facilities programme. I can say, however, that the areas that I mentioned in answer to the initial question — sailing, cycling, rowing, equestrianism, basketball, volleyball, indoor athletics and tennis — are covered in the funding applications that were submitted by Counties Down, Antrim, Armagh and Londonderry. Unfortunately, no applications were received from County Tyrone or County Fermanagh.

If the honourable Member is endeavouring to get me to take a particular route to Jordanstown, I will leave him with the county designations, from which I am sure he will be able to draw a certain conclusion.

## North West 200

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the level of support provided by his Department to the North West 200 road race in 2009. (AQO 2271/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The organisers of the North West 200 have reached a critical milestone. The event has grown to such an extent that the Coleraine and District Motor Club now deems necessary a strategic and co-ordinated approach to its management.

Officials in my Department have been working closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Coleraine Borough Council to support the club in its efforts to secure the sustainability and growth of the event in the future. Measures include a three-year funding package to be delivered by my Department and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

The package is designed to respond to the developmental needs that were identified by the club and its key partners, including the appointment of a business development/operations manager, an upgrade of the events, web presence, and the identification of key partners across the public sector. The award in 2008-09 of some £85,000 will contribute towards the cost of employing a business development/operations manager and developing the organisation's website.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I also thank him for the support and help that he and his Department have given to the North West 200, which is the premier sporting event in Northern Ireland and which attracts many thousands of people to the north coast each year. Will the Minister outline what impact the closure of the Ballymena to Coleraine railway line on 16 May 2009 will have on this particular sporting

event, given that its important 80th anniversary race day will be held on that day?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Member quite rightly alluded to the importance of the North West 200 and its existing pulling power as regards spectators. He also quite rightly alluded to the fact that it is the largest outdoor sporting event in Northern Ireland. In fact, the North West 200 is one of the largest sporting events on these islands. Therefore, it is important that we do whatever we can to promote, sustain and develop that event.

The issue of the potential railway line closure is a matter for the organisers of the North West 200 — the Coleraine and District Motor Club. However, the club has raised some concerns with me about the closure. Given the tourism potential, I have spoken to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and we have written jointly to the Minister for Regional Development to ask him to ensure that every effort is taken to provide commensurate bus arrangements during the week of the North West 200 and to provide a pre-publicity campaign to advise travellers of the change. We must ensure that we sustain, built on and develop the North West 200 in the same way as has been done in the Isle of Man with the TT races there.

### **Foras na Gaeilge: Minutes of Meetings**

7. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made in requiring Foras na Gaeilge to publish the minutes of its meetings in both English and Irish on its website as soon as they have been ratified. (AQO 2272/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** At the last North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language sectoral format, I discussed with the Irish Republic's Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs the issue of making minutes of Foras na Gaeilge board meetings available in English. That is being followed up by departmental officials, who raised the issue with the chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge at an accountability meeting in Belfast on 27 February.

**Mr McCausland:** Does the Minister agree that, although Irish is the working language of that body, it has a bilingual website and that making the minutes of its board meetings available on the Internet in English would facilitate engagement with the wider community who do not speak Irish?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The short answer is yes. Everyone accepts that the working language of Foras na Gaeilge is Irish. However, with regard to the need for accountability and transparency, particularly for bodies that receive significant public funding, it would not be unreasonable to ask that the

activities of their boards be made easily accessible to the majority of taxpayers, whether they are residents and citizens of Northern Ireland or the Irish Republic. The first language of virtually all of those taxpayers is English.

4.00 pm

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

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Social Security Offices

*Debate resumed on motion:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to withdraw her plans to revise services at Social Security Offices as recommended under the Strategic Business Review, following a similar decision being taken in England. — *[Mr G Robinson.]*

**Mr Bresland:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. We are all aware that the unemployment level is rising drastically and that the situation will get much worse before it gets better. At a time when record numbers of people are facing unemployment, the Minister is proposing to remove services from offices and to relocate staff. Those proposals should be withdrawn given the current economic climate.

A large number of people are coming into the benefits system for the first time, and the offices should be open to assist them. Those people need a system that is easily accessible and constant, not one that is in the midst of radical changes. Things are difficult enough for those people at the minute without changing the method by which they will receive their only source of income. Hopefully, that will only be their source of income for a short time.

The proposed relocation of staff and services could, once again, leave rural areas disadvantaged in comparison with urban areas. Relocating staff will not move people to rural areas; instead, they will be taken from rural areas to work in urban offices. The discrimination against rural areas that goes on time after time in Department after Department must not be allowed to continue.

The Minister is focusing on her proposed reforms rather than directing her attention towards assisting those who are, or who will soon be, unemployed. That is an unacceptable course of action. Why should the public suffer because the Minister wants to change a system that has worked for over 40 years? If the Minister suddenly found herself unemployed, she would not relish the prospect of having to travel a long distance to deal with a system that is in the midst of drastic changes. If she were in that situation, she, like those who experience it every day, would rather deal with the current familiar system.

In England, the response to rising unemployment has been to halt the closure of offices and to employ more front line staff to assist people who are newly unemployed. The Minister seems to think that her

current proposals are a much better way to address the problem — we all know that those proposals will fail and will leave many people much worse off.

The Minister should follow the example set by Westminster to help the unemployed rather than ignoring it and going in the opposite direction. Therefore, I call on the Minister to withdraw her planned reforms and to focus on assisting the large number of people who are unemployed in order to get them through this difficult time.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Over recent weeks, I have had several conversations and meetings with staff from the Social Security Agency. They have major concerns about the impact that the implementation of the strategic business review would have on staff and claimants. As a representative for Foyle, I am concerned about the long-term impact on jobs in my constituency; the number of people claiming income support will reduce as people transfer to other benefits because of the new social-security rules on entitlement.

I will focus on the key concerns of staff and claimants, particularly the loss of core services. Staff in the west are concerned that they would have to travel from Derry to Omagh or to Enniskillen, and I have no doubt that staff in other centres have similar concerns. The one-way journey from Derry to Omagh takes 80 minutes, and it takes two hours to travel from Derry to Enniskillen. Such long journeys would have an adverse effect on people with dependants, and would add considerably and unnecessarily to the time spent away from home. They would also be totally at odds with Northern Ireland's sustainability strategy.

Customer service would also be affected. Staff are concerned that the redesign of offices would diminish personal contact with service users and lead to a greater reliance on telephone services. According to a recent survey of the long-term unemployed in Wales, 67% of men aged between 18 and 24 had communication difficulties. I am concerned that the same client group in Northern Ireland would be directed to a telephone service rather than to a personal face-to-face service from a client adviser.

Staff also expressed the legitimate concern that a centralised approach to the processing of benefits would reduce the extent to which they can adopt a personal approach. At present, they are familiar with clients' situations and can prioritise work on claims from families or individuals who are under exceptional, or particular, pressure.

Staff in my constituency have discussed the projected number of claimants for income support that, according to the plan, would be processed from the Foyle office. They are concerned that changes in eligibility rules will, over time, reduce the number of claimants of that benefit. Such a reduction would have

a disproportionately negative impact on jobs in the Foyle office.

It is widely accepted that all public services must be made more efficient to improve their delivery. That will involve the management of change, but those changes should make sense.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has publicly signalled that she is listening carefully to staff and taking their concerns on board. I call on the Minister to outline to the House the feedback that has been received from the consultation so far, and I ask her to signal the decisions that she is likely to make on several issues.

I understand, from reading written parliamentary questions, that 200 civil servants who work for DSD in the greater Belfast area are seeking transfers to the north-west. If those should go ahead, how significant would be the loss in the provision of core services, such as jobseeker's allowance and the social fund, from the Foyle constituency?

Members are aware that working conditions in many social security offices must be improved; they are not fit for purpose and must be upgraded and modernised. Will the Minister assure the House that every consideration will be given to the concerns raised during the consultation process and by Members today, particularly about the relocation of core services?

**Mr Irwin:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate, and I thank the Members who brought the motion to the House. The issue causes particular concern in my constituency, where the services available at the Armagh social security office are under review. It is proposed to relocate to Dungannon and Newry some of those services, and a proportion of the staff who process jobseeker's allowance and income support claims.

I have already made my feelings clear on the issue in the press and by way of questions to the Minister, as well as through the local council in Armagh.

It seems ludicrous to the staff and to those who use the services in Armagh that, at a time when enquiries and visits to social security offices are at an all-time high, the Department for Social Development is thinking of reducing the staff complement and moving the processing services out of the Armagh area.

The Armagh office has over 2,000 callers a month, and that will rise in light of the economic situation. It does not make sense to talk of cuts and staff relocations in the midst of difficult economic times when people are losing their jobs and immediately accessing the benefits system. Staff with whom I have spoken are, rightly, concerned that the proposed new telephone services will remove the necessary face-to-

face contact that the public require and that that will be followed, in turn, by possible staff cuts.

I am involved in a campaign organised by Armagh City and District Council to help to prevent job losses and the reduction of services in the city and surrounding areas. The Social Security Agency situation is a significant concern, as are health services in Mullinure, Longstone and St Luke's Hospitals.

The Minister must come to her senses on this issue—especially in Armagh, where the city's public sector is under increasing strain. I ask the Minister to withdraw the review and to prevent a reduction in services in the Armagh office and, in turn, to prevent a further reduction in public-sector employment in Armagh city. Many other parts of the UK have seen an increase in the number of staff being recruited at job centres to deal with the obvious rise in demand. Why is the Minister pursuing an altogether different approach in Northern Ireland, given that we are facing similar difficulties?

**Mr A Maginness:** The motion is fundamentally flawed, irrespective of the merits or demerits of the actual proposals that have been put forward in the strategic business review of the Social Services Agency. It is flawed because the basic premise is that a similar plan has been withdrawn in Britain. That plan has not been withdrawn; it has been suspended. The two plans are significantly and substantially different.

In the English plan—indeed, it is a programme rather than a plan—50,000 jobs have been lost. More than 400 front line offices have been closed, and there has been a 90% decrease in processing centres. If that were translated to Northern Ireland, one would have a proposal—not a programme, but a proposal—to close 50% of our public offices. There is no such proposal here. Not a single public office will close.

The English programme would have resulted in there being two processing centres in Northern Ireland. The plan is to retain 16 of the present 35 processing centres. There are significant and substantial differences between the English programme—

**Mr Simpson:** Will the Member acknowledge that he is playing with words, because I think that the wording of the Department's proposal is that no offices will close at this time?

**Mr A Maginness:** I am not playing with words at all; I am reflecting what the proposals represent. If anyone needs any reassurance, the Minister can give reassurance on that point.

The situation here is quite different to what is happening in England, upon which the motion is premised. In England, a programme has been suspended, whereas over here we have proposals. Of course, those proposals were conceived under direct rule; they were

inherited by the Department and the Minister, and although they have undergone public consultation, which ended in January 2009, at this stage, they are merely proposals.

4.15 pm

Although the proposals have been criticised publicly, I am certain that when the Minister and the Department come to a final decision, they will take all meritorious and constructive criticisms into account. That is the nature of our democracy: one publishes proposals, there is public consultation, and then there is a debate.

Members have said that concerns have been articulated by the trade unions involved with the Social Security Agency — and rightly so. I am confident that the Minister will be sympathetic to constructive observations and criticisms. However, it is wrong to completely close our minds to any changes to a system that has been operating without real change for 40 years, and it is important that we make the system work as efficiently and productively as possible for clients.

Some Members emphasised — no one more so than the previous Member who spoke — the fact that we are in the middle of an economic crisis. Therefore, we must have an efficient system that is empathetic to users' needs. Once again, I am certain that the Minister will take that into consideration.

I am confident that the Department and the Minister will mitigate the worst features of the proposals. In particular, I am certain that a sympathetic hearing will be given to staff members who must travel long distances, particularly those on part-time contracts and those who have caring responsibilities.

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

**Mr A Maginness:** I close by saying that the motion is fundamentally flawed and should be rejected. We should await the Minister's due consideration of the proposals.

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I thank all Members who contributed sensibly to the debate. Once again, I welcome the opportunity to deal with the misinformation and misplaced opinions that continue to be circulated about the strategic business review proposals by those who appear to be opposed to any change in the Social Security Agency, or, indeed, by those who seek any opportunity to score cheap political points.

Before today's debate, some people called on me to suspend the public consultation process. I have never heard anything so daft coming from supposedly serious politicians. I am determined that the public have their say. I will not deny people that right, and I am sure that all 108 MLAs want the public to have

their say. Do Members want to cancel the public's right to have their say or to go against their wishes?

When I have had a chance to consider what all the stakeholders think, I will take full account of their views, along with my own, and outline the way forward.

The motion calls on me to withdraw my plans to revise services at social security offices, following a similar decision in England. The decision that was made in England is not remotely similar; in fact, the two are completely different and unrelated. In that respect, as my colleague Mr Maginness said, the motion is fundamentally flawed.

I recall something that the First Minister said in a debate on a different issue — I think that it was last week. He said that there is a difficulty with tabling motions in the middle of a consultation period, before Ministers can make decisions.

Notwithstanding that, I will provide the House with some facts. The Department for Work and Pensions has temporarily suspended its programme of office closures. The Department for Social Development and the SSA are not proposing any office closures. In Britain, 454 front line offices have been closed, and the number of processing centres has been reduced by over 90%. If we were to apply that proportionately to Northern Ireland, we would have half the number of public offices and only two processing centres. Some 50,000 jobs have been shed in Britain and large numbers of staff have been displaced great distances across that expanse of territory. I have made my position abundantly clear, and I will do so again here today: there will be no unfair or draconian changes of that kind in Northern Ireland.

I will not accept change that involves large numbers of staff moving long distances to new places of work, and I will not accept change that causes hardship to low-paid, part-time staff or staff with childcare or other caring responsibilities.

Contrary to what has been put around in the media by Sinn Féin and others, no one — and I emphasise, "no one" — will lose his or her employment as a result of any changes that I introduce. Recently, I instructed the Social Security Agency to recruit 150 new staff to meet growing demand at the front counter, and I have also said that I want the agency to review that on an ongoing basis in the context of the credit crunch and the economic downturn. Therefore, I am listening.

No public office will close. Social Security Agency offices will continue to deliver the full range of front line social security services, people will continue to be serviced by their local office, and a walk-in service will continue to be available. That will not be replaced by a telephony-based system, as has been put around. Telephony is additional to the services that are provided already.

Change is not about job cuts or office closures; it is about providing an improved service to all the people whom we represent throughout Northern Ireland. I am committed to providing the best service possible for the people who use the Social Security Agency. Members are right: this is about delivering for and serving the needs of all the people.

There has been misinformation about telephony. Should people not be entitled to conduct their business with the Social Security Agency by telephone, if they find that more convenient? Should they not have that choice? Why should we want to deny them that choice?

The social security structures in Northern Ireland are over 40 years old. They are based on a service model that sees people having to travel to district offices, regardless of whether they need or want to. Reform of the service is long overdue, and I am determined to ensure that that happens. The Social Security Agency cannot stand still.

I ask this question of those Members who called on me to withdraw my plans for change: do people in Northern Ireland deserve an inferior service to that available to citizens in Britain? I do not believe so, and I believe that the overwhelming majority of Members would agree with me that the people of Northern Ireland deserve a service as good as — if not better — than that enjoyed by citizens in Britain.

I remind Members that the proposals are simply that: proposals. During the consultation process, I have listened carefully to concerns regarding the potential impacts on staff, as well as other concerns that were raised. As I said, I also have my own concerns.

Turning to the issues raised by Members. George Robinson was worried about the backlog in processing. I am sure that George recognises that we have to try to improve how processing is done to ensure that benefits get to people in a more timely fashion. Mickey Brady said that we must put the customer first — I agree with him. Our priority is to improve the service for people, but how can that be done if nothing changes? As usual, Mr Brady wants to have it every way.

David Hilditch and Billy Armstrong raised the issue of telephony, but I say to them and to other Members that telephony is an additional option to the walk-in service. Thomas Burns raised various issues, and I agree with him that we must complete the consultation exercise. I note the point that Anna Lo made about creating upheaval at this difficult economic time — when I bring forward my proposals, she will see that her worries about major upheaval have been unfounded.

Claire McGill raised issues about Strabane — I note those issues and I share her concern about the distance travelled by staff. I repeat, and I emphasise, that I will not accept a solution that involves large numbers of staff having to travel long distances to a new place of

work. Adrian McQuillan was concerned about staff travel and work-life balance, as were others. Those concerns will be reflected in my future proposals.

George Savage said that staff have been ignored — I do not believe that to be the case, because in the past number of weeks I have met many SSA staff who clearly articulated their concerns about their childcare responsibilities and their caring responsibilities for older people. I have listened to those concerns. I place great importance on good-quality consultation with all stakeholders.

Michelle McIlveen mentioned my colleagues' opposition to this motion in the Committee for Social Development. However, today's motion is based on a false understanding of the situation in Great Britain and is, therefore, flawed, so my colleagues are entirely right to oppose it. Michelle also stated that she generally supported reform, and then argued against it on the grounds of timing — I will reflect on that.

Daithí McKay was concerned about the workers — so am I; he was also concerned about the unemployed — so am I. However, I am also concerned about delivering the best possible service for all the people of Northern Ireland. Allan Bresland raised the issue of unemployment, particularly in an economic downturn, and the fact that there would be a greater impact on the work of Social Security Agency staff. That is why I gave instructions for 150 new staff to be recruited and trained.

My colleague Pat Ramsey raised the issue of the effect on staff and claimants, and asked that I give thoughtful consideration to all the issues raised by Members today — I will give thoughtful consideration to all the issues raised by everyone across the Chamber.

Alban Maginness made the point that the motion is based on a false premise, and he argued that Members should be confident not to close their minds to change when change involves improving a service to the people whom we represent and who we want to ensure get the money that they are entitled to.

*4.30 pm*

William Irwin talked about the situation in Armagh. There will be no reduction of service in Armagh, and I hope that that service will be improved. I have talked to some of the staff in the Armagh office and understand their concerns about having to travel long distances. I am examining how I can retain what is good about the current proposals, while mitigating any unfair or unreasonable impacts, particularly on staff or clients. I also recognise that during this economic downturn, when there is a growing workload in the agency, major upheaval is undesirable.

When I have fully considered the issues raised during the consultation, I will return to the House and present it with substantially revised proposals. I will

also publish them in the equality impact assessment consultation paper. Members will see from that paper that I am listening carefully, and that I was right not to abort the consultation process.

We are in the first phase of our new accountable democratic institutions, and it is only natural that, as politicians, we try to please as many people as possible — most of the time. Immature politicians will succumb to the temptation to exploit people's fears and anxieties to score cheap political points. However, I believe that more maturity is required in Government. It would be wrong to abandon a worthwhile initiative just because a lobby or vested interest might be unhappy about some aspect of it. We should never throw the baby out with the bath water when we look at policy development and reform.

I will return with revised proposals, which, I believe, will be in the best interests of our constituents and the wider public in Northern Ireland. It is important to remember that we have a duty to bring about hope and expectation, and not to ferment anxieties. I understand that there are concerns, and I am listening to those. Members must wait to see what my revised proposals will contain, because that is what people are entitled to expect.

**Mr McCarthy:** Is it not the point that the Minister's Committee unanimously agreed that she should defer the proposal? If she is a listening Minister, surely she should be listening to what the Committee says.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have listened, and I am listening, to what everybody has to say. I will go back to the premise of the motion: it is based on a false premise, and the motion is flawed. Notwithstanding that, I will return to the Chamber with revised proposals, which, I believe, will be in the best interests of all of our citizens across Northern Ireland, irrespective of where they live or where they receive their social security services. It is in the best interests of our citizens to ensure that they receive the benefits to which they are entitled, and we must have a system in place that allows for that to happen.

I know what the concerns are. I have listened, and I know all about the staff whom we employ —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Minister please draw her remarks to a close?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I want to pay tribute to them. That is what the public is entitled to expect from the very best-quality Social Security Agency. I pay tribute to all the staff who work there.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Minister's time is up. If the Minister is a listening Minister, she will have heard that I called time after 15 minutes.

**Mr Simpson:** Before I wind on the motion, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to pay tribute to the two

soldiers who were brutally murdered and to those who were injured at the weekend. Our thoughts and prayers are with the injured and with the bereaved families.

I do not speak as Chairperson of the Committee — the Deputy Chairperson spoke on behalf of the Committee. I commend my party colleagues for tabling the motion. It has been pointed out already that staff in social security offices work under severe pressure from day to day, and they do not always receive praise or get credit. Sometimes, they are on the receiving end of criticism from people such as me, dealing with constituents' problems.

Be that as it may, the truth is that staff in social security offices seek, on a daily basis, to do their utmost to deliver the best outcome for members of the public. They often have to deal with people in financial crisis and do so, frequently, in the midst of a backlog. In the current economic climate, that can only mean that staff are even busier and are under ever more strain, for which they deserve everyone's thanks.

Whatever individual Members have said, I hope that the Minister accepts that we have tabled the motion only in an effort to ensure that issues related to processing benefits are got right in the current economic climate, in which unemployment is already on the increase and is expected to rise even further during the year.

**Mr Shannon:** Does the Member agree that staff in social security offices, particularly in Newtownards and Downpatrick, are greatly concerned because they feel that they have not been fully consulted? They also feel that they have been asked to flit from one office to another, which I consider to be unfair. Most importantly, benefit recipients are worried that they may no longer receive the level of care and attention that they have received in the past.

**Mr Simpson:** Yes, I agree that there is grave concern. The Member knows, and other Members who represent the area know, the details of the offices that he mentioned, but I certainly agree that there are great concerns. It may be that local offices will not be closed, but there is very real concern that the services available in local offices will be affected, and we have heard many of those concerns expressed in the debate. I will try to deal with a number of them as quickly as I can in the time allotted to me.

George Robinson, who moved the motion, expressed to the Minister the urgent need to address the demand for an increase in front line services. He said that current proposals are on a wing and a prayer and he encouraged the Minister to look at what has happened in DWP offices in England, where staff face burn out and where there is concern for vulnerable people such as senior citizens.

Mickey Brady said that customer service is paramount, and that the current proposals would bring

that service to a very low ebb. He also said that face-to-face services were essential, and that the phone system was not fit for purpose.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Hilditch, made the point that the Committee had been briefed by the Department and had taken evidence from NIPSA. He and the Committee believe that the review was ill-timed due to the economic downturn. They regard the lack of childcare provision as a major issue for working mothers.

Billy Armstrong said that Magherafelt and Cookstown are very high unemployment areas in which the level of unemployment may reach 50,000. He also said that staff found it difficult to cope with their current workload.

I did not understand where Mr Burns was coming from when he put the question about the 2012 Olympics to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, but I have had it confirmed that he is training for the Olympics. I do not know what Mr Burns would look like were he to appear in a leotard in 'Folks on the Hill' — I look forward to seeing that — but he is performing somersaults. It is obvious that he is training for the Olympics, because in the Committee —

**The Minister for Social Development:** He has listened.

**Mr Simpson:** Well, her colleague who sits on the Bench behind the Minister has not listened, nor has Mrs Kelly from Upper Bann. However, I will say that Mr Burns and Alban Maginness unanimously agreed with the proposals in the Committee. Therefore, they must have been promised a job. If one checks the Committee minutes, it will be seen that the decision was unanimous.

In fact, when I put questions to the Committee, I purposely looked at the two SDLP members, because I knew that the thumbscrews and the pressure would have been applied, and they shook their heads in unity.

I do not know what has happened between then and now, but there has, obviously, been an issue with the Minister. However, that is, perhaps, something to which we can return.

Mr Pat Ramsey's comments were very welcome. He highlighted concerns about travelling from Londonderry to Omagh, the lack of time, personal contact, face-to-face interviews and the negative impact on jobs. Claire McGill referred to this being a big issue in Strabane: 1,400 people are on the list for jobs, and, I think, only 20 jobs are available. She said that travel arrangements are, again, an issue.

The Minister said that she will bring revised proposals back to the House. I wonder whether those revised proposals will go out for consultation, but it will be interesting to see what they are. However, I

welcome the Minister's tone, and her expressions were very good — she would make a very good actress.  
[Laughter.]

**Mr A Maginness:** You are not bad yourself.  
[Laughter.]

**Mr Simpson:** I do not have the physique for it.

In relation to the mood and tone of the Minister, I think that she is weakening her position — despite her façade. Perhaps, as a Committee, we will look favourably upon those revised recommendations. However, we will have to see what those recommendations will be.

People have major and very real concerns. Although we are told that there will be no redundancies, I fear that because of the proposals that are before us, young females who went off work to rear their children and to go back into part-time work will be forced to resign from their jobs. In effect, that could be constructive dismissal.

Therefore, I urge the Minister to go back to her advisers and to consider that matter seriously. I know that she said that she has taken everything on board. That is important, because there is a major economic crisis. There are a lot of job losses, a lot of concerns, a lot of stress and anxiety on people who, quite frankly, do not need it. Many vulnerable people have concerns. Therefore, I ask the Minister seriously to look at the whole situation. We will certainly look at the proposals that she will bring back, I assume, to the Committee as well as to the House. I wish that we had the same control on thumbscrews on this side of the House as the Minister seems to have.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to withdraw her plans to revise services at Social Security Offices as recommended under the Strategic Business Review, following a similar decision being taken in England.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Country-of-Origin Labelling

**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 Irwin:** I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of adding value to local produce in an increasingly competitive international market; notes the benefits of having rigorous traceability systems; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure the early introduction of accurate country-of-origin labelling based on where animals are reared.

As a farmer, I declare an interest in this issue. I very much welcome the opportunity to propose the motion, especially given the difficult economic times in which the agriculture industry finds itself.

Northern Ireland produce is, clearly, among the best in the world. Our beef, pork, lamb and poultry is of a very high standard, and our traceability systems are rigorously enforced. That, I believe, prevented the EU from banning exports after the recent dioxins scare.

Our traceability arrangements proved their worth as affected farms were quickly located, certain products were removed from shelves and the affected herds closed.

4.45 pm

It is true that the EU has stringent requirements on the labelling of products to ensure that no member state actively discourages the sale or purchase of meats from another member state. However, there are many steps that our Administration could take to increase consumer awareness of the very high quality of Northern Ireland produce. They could, without breaching the rules, make consumers aware of the benefits of buying local produce.

The EU regulations on the labelling of meat products contain a major loophole that supermarkets have long been exploiting. A mince pie can be labelled as British, and, as such, give the consumer the impression that it is made from meat from animals reared on British farms. However, the labelling relates only to the place where the product last underwent a treatment or process that resulted in a substantial change — for example, mince being put in a pie. That is wrong; as consumers, we are not aware that the meat might have come from a country with less stringent production values and quality control than our own. Thus, the labelling is misleading. The ruling is detrimental to our industry, and it demands to be rectified.

Independent industry champions, such as the Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland (LMC), have been working hard to promote our local produce, both at home and abroad. A recent LMC survey showed that six out of 10 Northern Ireland consumers want to know the origin of the beef served to them when they eat out. The food service sector is one sector in which labelling regulations are not enforced, and there is consumer-led demand for product origin to be made known in that sector. The Minister states that she is working on a pilot scheme with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and the LMC, but she still appears reluctant to commit, even though, in the recent LMC survey, consumers clearly demanded greater awareness of the origin of beef.

Respondents to the survey placed Northern Ireland beef well ahead for its freshness, quality and tenderness; indeed, three in five people picked Northern Ireland farm-quality-assured sirloin as their first choice. The evidence is clear: Northern Ireland produce is sought after. If we cannot encourage our consumers at home to buy that produce through clear labelling, how can we expect to be more effective in the exports market?

The LMC survey shows that if information is provided on the origin of food, Northern Ireland consumers will purchase Northern Ireland produce. That proves that loyalty to local produce is alive and well, and that what is lacking is the determination on the part of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the FSA to push ahead and allow our local produce to be identifiable to consumers, not only here but across the EU. The Minister states that she is working with the FSA on an EU proposal relating to food information for consumers. I stress the need for a new proposal to give consumers the information on product origin that they demand.

During last year's dioxin scare, consumers realised that some products that were perhaps perceived as being strong Northern Ireland brands did not, in fact, originate in Northern Ireland. That was evidenced by the fact that the only pork that was left on the shelves and deemed safe to retail was Northern Ireland-sourced pork. The regulations on country of origin need a major overhaul, and there is much that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) can do to help the situation and to make the choice easier for consumers.

We need clear, plain labelling of our own produce that shows where animals were reared. The time, money and effort that farmers spend in producing high-quality products demand that our consumers can easily identify a local mince pie, sausage, steak or lamb chop from among products that have been processed in the UK or Northern Ireland but which

contain meat that has not been sourced in Northern Ireland.

Surveys show that consumers demand more clarity, and it is up to the Department, in conjunction with the FSA, to ensure that they get that clarity. Our industry would be much stronger today if such labelling were in place. I ask the Minister to redouble her efforts to address that issue.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Elliott):** On 13 March 2008, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development hosted a seminar in the Long Gallery in Parliament Buildings to identify actions needed to revive Northern Ireland's red-meat sector, and it followed the publication of a report by the Red Meat Industry Task Force. The seminar was attended by representatives from the farming community, local processors and retailers such as Tesco, Sainsbury's and Marks and Spencer. Also in attendance were representatives from the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association, the Livestock and Meat Commission, the Department and, of course, Committee members.

Five key priorities were discussed at the seminar, and recommendations were made on how to counteract the downward trend being experienced in the red-meat sector. A common response that was evident across those priorities was country-of-origin labelling. It was seen as one action that would enable the industry to compete on price with low-cost suppliers. It was also seen as a means of bridging the gap between loss and profitability right at the farm gate, and as a means of providing additional value to our produce in Northern Ireland.

In recent weeks, the Committee has received presentations from organisations such as Farmers for Action and Ballylaw Farmers Group, and they are still demanding that the Minister and her Department introduce country-of-origin labelling. However, unfortunately, they are still receiving the same tired excuse that Committee members received when we raised the issue a year ago, and, no doubt, we will hear it again later in the debate, that the Department can only legislate for red meat as far as the retailer, that the Food Standards Agency is responsible thereafter, and that the Minister has introduced a voluntary labelling scheme with restaurants, rather than a compulsory scheme, while she considers her options.

The Committee has generated a great deal of correspondence with the Department on the matter, and we have considered the Department's responses to our calls for an appropriate labelling scheme that allows consumers to easily identify our quality Northern Ireland red meat.

The Committee does not accept the excuse that the Department has only part responsibility for legislating in the matter, particularly when the Northern Ireland Executive strive, through the Programme for Government, to ensure that there is joined-up government. That is a lazy excuse from the Department, which almost says that it cannot be bothered. It is an excuse that is unacceptable to the Northern Ireland industry and to consumers wanting to be better informed about the produce that they are purchasing — the same consumers who want to support local produce. There is nothing to prevent the Department from working with the Food Standards Agency to introduce a clear, precise, informative and understandable labelling system, other than for the Department to have a lackadaisical attitude towards country-of-origin labelling.

With regard to the voluntary scheme, the Committee learned at its meeting on 17 February 2009 that the voluntary labelling pilot scheme, involving origin labelling of beef in the food-service sector is being operated in all 14 of the Botanic Inns outlets. Feedback indicates that in the outlets where the scheme is operating, the voluntary pilot has been viewed positively by the business and its customers.

The Committee applauds that restaurant group for its active participation in the scheme, but we are of the view that the voluntary scheme has failed. Indeed, when we asked the departmental officials whether DARD had participated in the scheme, they could not confirm that, and they confused the matter with procurement policies.

This is not about procurement, it is about consumer choice. It is about consumers being informed of where their food has come from and then making a choice as to whether they wish to purchase it.

It is a sad indictment of DARD, which is leading on its own voluntary scheme, but it is not even aware whether it is participating in it. It is a sad indictment on the Department if we are subsequently to have it confirmed that it did not, or does not, participate in the scheme, and that it is not cajoling the remainder of the public service to participate in it.

That is evidence — if evidence is required — of the need to introduce a compulsory scheme. The motion recognises the need —

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

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development:** — for country-of-origin labelling to be introduced in order to allow our industry to compete in an increasingly difficult market.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this issue. It is important that we deal with this

matter, but it is unfortunate that the motion has been directed at the wrong Minister.

The Food Standards Agency is the responsibility of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and labelling is clearly within the remit of the Food Standards Agency. It would be very simple for the Health Minister to act in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide proper labelling of meat products and, indeed, the wide range of products that are produced on farms.

The issue of labelling also affects imports into this country. The local mushroom industry has been devastated by produce that is imported from other countries and re-labelled as having been processed here, and which then competes in the local market.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I would not usually make an intervention on an agricultural question, but Jim Shannon speaks on everything, so I may as well do it, too.

The Member mentioned the Food Standards Agency and stated that labelling is more closely linked to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety than to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Given that the FSA will receive almost £50 million over the next three years, based on the principles of better regulation, does the Member agree that labelling of meat products is exactly the sort of case in which the Food Standards Agency should have more authority and the ability to impose better regulation?

**Mr Molloy:** I thank the Member for the intervention, and I agree with the point that she raised. The responsibility for this issue should lie with the Food Standards Agency. Those with the responsibility for labelling should take on that responsibility and ensure —

**Mr T Clarke:** The Food Standards Agency has some form of responsibility for food labelling, but does the Member not accept that the Agriculture Minister is responsible for agriculture? At the last Committee meeting, a question was asked about how much the Agriculture Department had lobbied the Food Standards Agency. According to my recollection, it had done none.

**Mr Molloy:** I thank the Member for the intervention. The responsibility for labelling falls to the Food Standards Agency, and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is responsible and accountable for the Food Standards Agency.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Molloy:** OK; I will get to make my speech yet. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms S Ramsey:** As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I assure the Member that legislation and matters concerning the Food Standards Agency regularly come before us. We

ask probing questions, and we will take on board some of the issues that are raised in today's debate. Indeed, those are issues that I, and other members of Sinn Féin, raise on a regular basis.

**Mr Molloy:** I thank the Member for the intervention. It is important to state, once again, where the direct responsibility for this matter lies. The Food Standards Agency has a direct responsibility, and the Health Minister is responsible for that agency. The local Assembly enables us to regulate and to move within different Departments, and, obviously, we want joined-up government.

Recently, there was the issue concerning dioxins and who had the priority responsibility for responding to that matter. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development had responsibility for the farms aspect of that matter. However, it was the Food Standards Agency that had responsibility for the clarification, labelling and storage of those products and how they were to be taken off the shelves. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is responsible for the Food Standards Agency, and, therefore, his Department should deal with that matter.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should also be the one that responds to the issue of labelling — the motion is misdirected. It is important that the Health Minister takes up the issue, takes responsibility for the Food Standards Agency and facilitates negotiations with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on other aspects of import legislation to ensure that produce is properly labelled. People must know a product's country of origin and that it is not simply a matter of reprocessing or re-labelling imports and selling them as though they were created in this country.

It is unfortunate that the opportunity to have the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety respond on behalf of the FSA has been missed.

5.00 pm

**Mr P J Bradley:** I declare an interest as someone who has a few cattle, not that they would keep many meat plants going. I also receive a single farm payment.

I support the motion, which calls for greater recognition to be given to local produce. Housewives and consumers would be more than supportive of locally produced foods if they were certain that the products purchased were of Irish origin or reared in farms across the water in Scotland, England or Wales. I would even so go so far as to say that those making the selection would be prepared to pay a little extra if they were assured that what they read on the label is accurate.

The current labelling system in our supermarkets is far from satisfactory. Apart from needing a magnifying

glass to read the information, one often requires an in-depth knowledge of the English language to understand what the wording really means or what the labels are trying to tell the consumer.

The Committee has previously met with representatives of supermarkets, who are also playing the word game. We heard them speak of supporting local producers, voluntary agreements and their wish to support the local economy. However, we were unable to make demands of them. It should be mandatory to show clearly, in large print, on produce displayed on supermarket shelves and in restaurants, the product's country of origin and where it was reared. Not until then will we be able to achieve what we know to be best for producer and consumer alike. That applies especially to red meat and poultry.

The motion deals specifically with labelling and country of origin. However, for fish, poultry and pork that are sourced thousands of miles from our shores and allowed into our supermarket shelves, some form of agreed labelling that assures consumers that the product is free from residues of synthetic growth promoters must be included on the information label. That field is complicated, because antibiotics that are used to promote growth can encourage bacteria that are more resistant to antibiotic treatments, and that makes them more difficult to detect. However, that is another good reason why the housewife and consumer should be given the maximum information on the descriptive label.

I return to the subject of beef labelling. Recently, some Members learned from a DARD press release — we have heard it debated whether this is an issue for DARD or the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), but this comes from a DARD press release — of a meat plant that was fined for failing to comply with the requirements applicable under Commission Regulation (EC) No 1825/2000, as enforced by regulation 5(1) of the Beef Labelling (Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001. In the information provided, we were told that there are compulsory requirements in the legislation that relate to establishing a link between meat products and each particular animal or group of animals. There is a requirement to state where the animal is slaughtered and cut, and we are also advised by the DARD information that, on 1 January 2002, further requirements were introduced that specifically relate to declaring where the animal was born and where fattening took place.

I do not want to comment on the conviction, but I consider the regulations that led to that charge's being brought to be somewhat petty. The cattle processed were from farms located but a short drive-time away, albeit in a separate jurisdiction. Perhaps the Minister will let us know her views on the prosecution of that Northern plant by her Department for failure to make it

known that the beef in question was sourced in the Republic of Ireland.

Legislation to improve food labelling should be made with a degree of flexibility, given our unique geographical and political identity. The Good Friday Agreement allows for the people of this jurisdiction to be Irish, British or both. If our food products were given the same flexibility, there would be times when we could identify with the popularity of the country of birth, rearing and processing, be that Ireland, Britain or both. For marketing purposes, in order to have the advantage of the best of both worlds, it must remain so, at least in the short term. I support the motion.

**Mr T Clarke:** Many good points have been made, and some that were not so good. I return once more to what Mr Molloy has said. Even after having listened to the debate on the social security offices, it seems that, on this issue, some Members apply protectionism for the benefit of Ministers from their political party. Where an agricultural practice is involved and the agricultural sector is affected, I do not know how the issue can be made solely the responsibility of the FSA.

Points have been raised in relation to the red meat task force report. We held a seminar here, and all sectors of the industry have agreed that there is a problem around the identification of meat. To try to protect the Minister, rather than the farming industry, is poor form.

**Mr Molloy:** I am not trying to protect anyone. It is the particular responsibility of the FSA to deal with labelling, and the responsibility for the FSA comes back to the Minister of Health. Whatever labelling requirements there are from the farming community should be passed on, and the FSA should enforce them.

**Mr T Clarke:** Perhaps the Member should listen to the lobbyists. When questions were asked of the Minister in the past, perhaps she should have listened to the sector and passed on to the FSA its concern in relation to labelling. It might be the direct responsibility of the FSA; however, it is up to the Minister to lobby on behalf of the agriculture sector and to push that forward. The FSA is not going to push something forward if it is not being lobbied by that particular sector.

I believe that many people in Northern Ireland would prefer to support local produce where possible. Research has shown that that will happen even if it involves a slightly higher cost for the customer. We all want more people to eat locally produced food so that we can support the local farmers and those associated with the industry. We know that Northern Ireland's produce has excellent traceability and we know that it is safe. However, the difficulty for many people is that they do not always know which foods are locally produced.

There is, of course, a difference between food that is reared locally and food that is processed locally, and that point was made by everybody who contributed to the debate. It is necessary for the Department of Agriculture to introduce labelling, or to pursue it with the FSA, so that people are not misled when making purchases.

Difficulties arise when a product is made up of ingredients that are sourced from different countries. That justifies the case for a clear labelling system which addresses those issues and makes it simpler for people to understand where the food that they are eating comes from. That would be of great benefit to the local agriculture industry, as I am sure that it would create an increased demand for locally produced food. As consumers become more aware of where their food comes from, many will opt for locally produced food as opposed to imported food. I support the motion.

**Mr Doherty:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion in the names of Mr Poots and Mr Irwin — two experienced members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development — recognises the importance of adding value to local produce in an increasingly competitive international market, and that is good. The motion notes the benefits of having rigorous traceability systems. However, it then goes way off-beam.

The point has been made that in so far as the FSA is accountable to anybody — and there is an issue around the FSA — it is accountable to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The only labelling responsibility that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has is that of the labelling of beef. When I read the motion, knowing that the two proposers are very experienced, I could not put it together. I wonder if they are more interested in selling DUP politics than in selling agricultural produce. The motion does not make sense as it is so misdirected.

There are other sectors — for example, pigs, poultry, sheep — where some traceability exists between processors, farms and farmers that could indicate — and I stress the word “could” — where the animal comes from and from where the meat is derived. If the beef model is to be followed, and if it is to be adapted by other sectors, the whole system needs to be much more robust, and there would be a cost factor in that. I am not saying that I am against that, but the only good thing that I can see about the debate is, perhaps, that it will start to shine a light on the FSA, which, to a large extent, is unaccountable.

To the extent to which it is accountable, the motion is aimed at the wrong Minister.

**Mr Bresland:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. Accurate labelling of the origin of products is very important. Many farmers face financial

hardship because of the economic downturn, which is forecasted to go on for much longer. They see losses being made to foreign products that are labelled as products of Northern Ireland simply because the last significant change to the product took place here. As a result of that hardship, it is possible that many farmers will lose their farms, many of which have been in the same family for generations. Added support for those farmers and accurate labelling of the product's country of origin is needed.

It has been claimed that labels such as “Product of Northern Ireland” would not fool the general public, but if chicken from France were labelled as a product of Northern Ireland simply because it had been cut into strips and covered in breadcrumbs here, it would be possible that people would mistake that to mean that the chicken that was used in the product came from Northern Ireland.

The people of Northern Ireland want to know where their food comes from. Research has shown that, given the choice between home products and imported products, the majority of people will purchase the home products, regardless of its price. In the current recession, that added support for the local economy cannot be a bad thing. We have all seen the ‘good food is in our nature’ advertising campaign, and it should be followed by accurate labelling, which would allow the people of Northern Ireland to know where the products that they are buying originated from.

The Minister previously stated that she has not ruled out legislation in that area, but she said that she did not want to add to the bureaucracy in the industry and that there would be practical difficulties in implementing it. The additional bureaucracy has not stopped the implementation of legislation in other areas, and practical difficulties in implementing legislation have been overcome in the past and will be overcome in the future. The reasons that have been given for not introducing legislation appear to be little more than an excuse for a lack of action.

The Minister also stated on numerous occasions that her Department is responsible for the labelling of beef products only. If the decisions that her Department makes relate only to the beef sector, the reasons that have been claimed for the lack of legislation appear even more questionable. How much additional bureaucracy can really be created, and how many practical difficulties will arise by implementing legislation for one division of a larger area?

Accurate labelling to show the country of origin of animals that are used in products is needed, and I call on the Minister to ensure the introduction of such labels. I support the motion.

**Mr McCallister:** I welcome the debate, and I thank and commend the Members who tabled the motion.

The current regulations and advice on food labelling is at best ambiguous and at worst misleading. Regulations and advice do not require the food service sector to actively inform customers of the country of origin of beef and processed meat products. Goods are deemed to have been manufactured or produced in the country in which it last underwent a treatment or process resulting in substantial change.

The present laws are detrimental to consumers and to farmers in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. The current regulations create a situation of confusion for consumers. Consumers who buy pork sausages that are labelled "British" should be confident that the animal was reared and slaughtered in the United Kingdom. Consumers who want to actively support British farmers and producers must be able to do so.

Consumers who recognise the higher standards of British meat products should be given the confidence and ability to choose correctly. At present, food labelling is confused and unsatisfactory.

5.15 pm

We must restore trust and confidence in British food and in labelling in general, and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has a key role to play in that. I bring to the Minister's attention guidance that has been given by the Scottish Executive, which suggests that if the term "Scottish" is used in the labelling of beef, the animal must have been born, reared and slaughtered in Scotland.

At present, Northern Ireland farmers can be associated with inferior products. The dioxins scare of recent months is a prime example, and we cannot allow our farmers and products to be associated with such a circumstance again. That is why it is critical that progress is made.

I also note and welcome the Conservative Party's 'honest food' campaign. It is a great encouragement to know that the next Government of the United Kingdom is committed to preventing non-British meat being labelled as British. The Conservative Party is committed to improving trust and confidence in British food and in labelling in general, and it is a genuine friend of farmers and consumers. I hope that the Members who proposed the motion will also welcome the Conservative Party's position on the matter.

I encourage the Minister simultaneously to bring the necessary pressure to bear on the Food Standards Agency and to produce further guidelines for the labelling of beef in Northern Ireland. During the current economic recession, everything possible must be done to help our food producers and to ensure that consumers are well informed. People will, quite rightly, look for the best bargain when they buy meat

products, and we should do all that we can to ensure that they get quality, healthy local produce.

The public deserve to have clear and concise food labels that not only detail nutritional information about various foods, but also clarify their origins. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland and other regions of the UK want to eat home-grown produce that tastes good, is healthy and is produced to the highest standards. They should be able to do that with confidence, which will come only when necessary changes are made. I support the motion.

**Mr Shannon:** I declare an interest right away. I have first-hand knowledge of problems that have arisen from the lack of food labelling; the most recent case being the pork-contamination scare that occurred just before Christmas.

I had severe problems with the way in which that situation was handled at that stage when the Department was made aware of the impending issue on the horizon. During the early stages, DARD officials were unavailable for comment and were not contactable for assistance. As the telephone lines got hotter with calls from suppliers and from those who I supply, and with no information, guidelines or help at hand, we were kept up to speed with developments by a 24-hour news station. At that time, advice from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was non-existent. That was unacceptable. Indeed, as the scale of the scare continued to expand, more and more questions were raised that were not answered. I made that comment to the Minister at the time.

I was contacted by four major pork suppliers in my area of Strangford who were, understandably, very worried about the lack of contact, support and help from DARD and the FSA. Alongside that, consumers of sausages, bacon and ham were unsure about which products were safe to eat. The fact was then, as it is now, that pork that was produced and packed in Northern Ireland was not contaminated and was safe for consumption.

The Department had a duty to stop the hysteria before suppliers and consumers went into panic. Instead, it was conspicuous by its silence. That situation would have been abated had food labelling been clearer. That is why we need a change in the way that things are done.

Whut we hae larn't fae this is tha impoartanse o' tha custimer haein aw tha facts, an this caun oanly be brought aboot in tha foarm o' cleer laeblin.

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squashed an makin shair that fowk ken aw tha facts an tha trooth.

That situation has taught the importance of consumers' having all the facts. That can be achieved only in the form of clear food labelling.

The Minister must ensure that, after that momentary blip, confidence in local production is restored and enhanced. Moreover, her Department must never again allow unfounded rumours and unsubstantiated reports to be bandied about for so long before they are quashed and before the people know the facts and truth.

After the fiasco before Christmas, I called for clear labelling of Northern Ireland produce. It became clear that Northern Ireland pork was free of contaminants. However, the same could not be said of products from other parts of this island and further afield. I urged the Minister to initiate a campaign to sell Northern Ireland pork produce and to ensure that labelling clearly states the product's origin. Today's motion is an extension of that desire. Although many Northern Ireland firms sourced locally, some larger stores were not as clear. Northern Ireland's pig farmers have been working hard to develop a product that is beyond reproach, and the recent scare showed that they were still able to sell and to stand by their product.

I have said before in the Assembly, and I have mentioned in Assembly questions, that Northern Ireland produce is world class. The superior quality of our fare is referred to in cookbooks and travel guides. In this time of economic uncertainty, it is even more important that we springboard onto the international stage and establish our name and reputation. Last year, I said in the Assembly:

"What could be nicer than to sit down to a starter of Portavogie prawn cocktail, a main meal of a good Ulster steak and Comber potatoes with Willowbrook Foods vegetables, finished off with hot Armagh apple pie and Glastry Farm ice cream?" — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p207, col 2*].

That is not as good as the Marks and Spencer advert on TV. I do not have the gravelly, sexy voice or the music. However, those comments were heartfelt and honest.

Given the weekend's events, it is understandable that the First Minister has delayed his trip to the USA. However, it is essential that our Ministers collectively demonstrate Northern Ireland's quality to the world. In my constituency, a local farmer proved what happens when other countries taste our produce. Even during these difficult financial times, Willowbrook Foods has received orders from the mainland as well as the Province. The company is expanding and hiring more staff, and it was almost the only prospective employer at a local job fair. That shows that growth can be achieved if a company steps out of its comfort zone.

Northern Ireland is a nation that excels at what it does. In the past, the world knew that fact. I ask the

Minister to respond and to promote Northern Ireland internationally. I support the motion.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your indulgence, I want to inform the House that one of my constituents, John Hurson, has, despite many challenges, arrived safely and brought humanitarian aid from the people of Tyrone to the beleaguered people of Gaza. We are proud of John's efforts. His convoy has been fraught with difficulty, but I am delighted that he has arrived safely.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, Mr Irwin and Mr Poots have brought this issue to the Chamber to be debated. As members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, they will be aware that my legislative responsibility on origin labelling relates solely to the EU-wide beef-labelling regulations that apply at retail level. The Food Standards Agency is responsible for all other food labelling, including country-of-origin labelling. Indeed, my officials have confirmed that fact at several Committee meetings and in response to Assembly questions.

The FSA is an independent UK body that is accountable here to the Assembly through the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The FSA is responsible, locally, for providing advice and draft legislation to the Minister of Health, as my colleague Ms Ramsey said. Therefore, it is that Minister who will introduce any domestic legislation on country-of-origin labelling. Therefore, if the Assembly passes the motion, I will refer the matter to the Minister of Health.

In mistakenly addressing this no-day-named motion to me, Mr Irwin and Mr Poots have missed an opportunity for a proper debate with the Minister who is responsible for this important issue. However, I will provide Assembly colleagues with an explanation of my own responsibilities, update the House on the FSA's progress and outline my views on the issue. My Department is responsible for the EU-wide beef-labelling regulations — including compulsory labelling requirements — that were introduced in July 2000 after instability in the beef market caused by the BSE crisis.

Under those regulations, all operators in the supply chain, including down to retail level, must label fresh, chilled and frozen beef and veal with information that indicates where the animal was born, raised, and slaughtered — that is compulsory.

The scheme is based on traceability, and the basis for that in the North is provided by the animal and public health information system (APHIS). APHIS is essentially a computerised system for monitoring all cattle movements. It forms the basis for the origin labelling of beef, and it has been vital in our fight against animal diseases and in protecting public health.

One point that should be remembered is that having that system in place comes at a cost to the farmer, the processor, and the retailer, in that they have to maintain the paperwork and the systems that allow animals to be traced fully. We should also remember that there is a cost to Government in the inspection and monitoring of the scheme. Having said all that, there is no doubt that the beef-labelling scheme has restored successfully and maintained consumer confidence in beef and that it provides a model for other similar products, in that it provides clear country-of-origin labelling at the point of sale.

However, the regulations also permit operators to voluntarily use terms such as “farm-quality assured” in order to help market their product, provided that they have been verified by an independent, accredited verification body and subsequently approved by DARD. That scheme has proved very worthwhile for local processors in marketing beef. More than 50 terms are currently approved, and the scheme provides processors with the flexibility to exploit market opportunities.

Enforcement of those regulations is carried out by DARD inspectors at abattoirs and cutting plants and by local authority environmental-health officers in retail outlets. Where labelling information is found to be absent, immediate corrective action is required by the operator, and a follow-up inspection visit is carried out. Based on that responsibility, which already compels suppliers of beef and veal to the retail market to specify where the animal was born, raised and slaughtered, if I were to introduce primary legislation for country-of-origin labelling, it could be strictly for beef labelling in the service sector. I do not believe that that goes far enough — as we heard today, people want the same for other foods, such as chicken and pork.

Initially, to test the market, my Department supported a voluntary pilot that was organised by the Livestock and Meat Commission for beef-origin labelling in local restaurants. Although that pilot is operating successfully across all the Botanic Inns outlets, we were disappointed that the hotel and catering sector was not prepared to extend it further.

However, recent EU proposals for food-information regulation have now become the focus of attention, as the early draft appears to provide for the provision for origin labelling of all food — not just beef. I will return to those regulations in a few minutes.

Many Members will be aware that the EC places severe restrictions on the promotion of local food. However, my Department has a range of support measures in place to encourage and support local food and to derive added value from the marketplace. We also work closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest NI to

complement the business and marketing support that they provide to the food sector.

My Department administers the regional food programme, which provides financial assistance to local agrifood groups in their efforts to promote quality regional food, and I recently launched the third round of that programme. Assistance is also available through my Department's rural development programme; for example, the processing and marketing grant scheme provides support towards capital expenditure on buildings and new equipment, as well as the cost of a business plan or feasibility study for the project. The grant scheme also provides support for businesses that are engaged in the marketing of the produce of agriculture. The supply-chain development programme, which is due to open shortly, will also make financial assistance available to local producers.

Of course, we also have the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), which has an extensive range of modern, industrial-scale food-processing equipment and product-development and packaging facilities. CAFRE's Loughry campus supports businesses and people working in the industry to develop the competencies and skills that are needed for food by an increasingly global market.

Those, together with the excellent science and research capability in food at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), provide local industry with a first-class range of innovation support, reflecting the central contribution that that sector makes to the local economy.

As that demonstrates, many of the key instruments that will allow our agrifood sector to develop and grow are to hand already. However, the debate raises another issue that affects us all — our food choices. Origin labelling helps to inform those choices; however, I remind colleagues that in the current economic climate, many people have to choose food according to price.

As I have already said, general food labelling falls within the remit of the Food Standards Agency, which is accountable locally to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Therefore, any call for the early introduction of accurate country-of-origin labelling should be addressed to Mr McGimpsey.

5.30 pm

Although that policy area is outside my responsibility, I can tell the House that the FSA is leading negotiations on a proposed EC food information regulation. The FSA has informed us that such regulations cover all food that is not included under the beef labelling regulations; therefore, it could be the best vehicle through which to investigate origin labelling. The regulations currently include the provision to introduce mandatory origin labelling of

produce where failure to do so may mislead consumers by implying that food has a different place of origin.

As Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, I am conscious that origin labelling is an important issue for many farming families across the North. Undoubtedly, the Department has an interest in the area, which is why my officials are working closely with the FSA here and in London, as well as with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales, to do our best to shape provision for origin labelling. Indeed, the issue of food labelling will be on the agenda of a video conference in which I will take part tomorrow with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Hilary Benn, and Ministers from Scotland and Wales. I have also had discussions with Bord Bia on the same issue.

The FSA is better placed to provide Members with a detailed update on the discussions surrounding the food information regulations and general labelling issues. However, this no-day-named motion calls for:

“the early introduction of accurate country-of-origin labelling”.

Members will know from experience that new legislation does not include provision for early introduction. I understand that the EU food information regulation is unlikely to come into effect for some time yet, as the EU requires extensive consultation and ratification by the EU Commission and the European Parliament. Therefore, if Members will excuse the pun, I caution a health warning against any early introduction of new regulations.

In summary, I am very proud of the food and drink that local farmers produce. They put their blood, sweat and tears into producing it. I encourage people, as I always do, to buy local produce whenever they can. In doing so, they are not only buying nutrition for their families; they are supporting the livelihoods of hundreds of rural families. I am sure that we all agree that consumers have the right to have clear labelling that does not mislead them: equally, however, that must be balanced by our efforts to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy for our food industries and the farming community that provides the raw materials.

Finally, we should be mindful that the use of origin labelling simply to allow customers to buy from one area in preference to another is against the free-market principles of the EC. I hope that my Executive colleague, Mr McGimpsey, will be able to update the Assembly in the near future on the work that the FSA is doing in this area, and I look forward to contributing to that debate. I intend to write formally to him, indicating my support for informed consumer choice through country-of-origin labelling. I will make sure that he receives a copy of the Hansard report of this debate. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Mr Poots:** I will begin by clarifying some matters. For the benefit of Members, the text of the motion that Mr Irwin and I submitted to the Business Office reads as follows:

“That this Assembly recognises the importance, in an increasingly competitive international market, of adding value to local produce; notes the benefit of the Province having rigorous traceability systems; and demands the early introduction of accurate country-of-origin labelling based on where animals were reared.”

That wording was signed off by the Assembly's Business Office. Mr Irwin and I did not include the name of any particular Minister in the motion when we submitted it. The issues raised by the two Sinn Féin Members and the Sinn Féin Minister should be addressed to the Business Office and with that party's members on the Business Committee rather than having a go at us for getting it wrong. We did not get it wrong; we did not identify the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. We submitted a motion that is relevant to the agricultural community and to the people of Northern Ireland, in that it requires the country of origin to be identified on food that is being sold in Northern Ireland.

Why do we want the country of origin to be identified? Mr Shannon may want the constituency of origin to be identified so that he can highlight Strangford, but we are just asking for country-of-origin labelling.

We are also delighted to hear that Mr McCallister is speaking for UCUNF (Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force) as opposed to the UUP and that it supports the motion. I trust that, in due course, the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force will be able to move this matter on. In Northern Ireland, that should not stop us making the case strongly for the introduction of country-of-origin labelling based on where animals are reared.

Recently, in the Lisburn City Council area — I should declare an interest in this issue — a gentleman bought a leg of lamb from a supermarket. The label said that the lamb had been produced in Northern Ireland. However, the man later found a New Zealand stamp on it. Animals are stamped with the name of the country in which they are slaughtered. The leg of lamb had been slaughtered and stamped in New Zealand, brought to Northern Ireland, cut up and packaged in a factory and then labelled as Northern Ireland produce when clearly it was not.

The council took that matter up and dealt with it through the proper processes. However, this happens time and time again in the poultry, pork, lamb and beef industries. Many items are brought in and sold as Northern Ireland or British produce when, in fact, they have been produced in many other countries.

Some people might wonder why it matters whether beef is produced in Brazil, chicken in Thailand or pork

in the Far East. That matters because the animal welfare conditions that are applied in Northern Ireland are considerably better than those that are applied in many other countries, which concerns consumers and farmers. Farmers who apply rigorous animal welfare conditions do so at a cost and at their own expense. If one farmer provides good welfare conditions for his animals and another farmer provides lesser conditions, why should the latter be rewarded for providing less suitable animal welfare conditions and achieving a similar price for his animals to that which the former achieves?

There can be a difference in the materials that are fed to animals. For example, in the United States of America, hormones are still used in the production of meat and milk. That is not the case in Europe. Genetically modified materials are not produced in Northern Ireland or in the rest of Europe. Those are matters of concern for consumers.

Other countries add additives to assist the growth of produce or genetically modify crops to assist production, and that can put people here at a commercial disadvantage. If consumers do not want to consume those products, they should know which ones come from countries that allow such practices. It is a matter of selling a product to a customer honestly. When consumers lift a piece of meat off a shelf, they cannot identify whether it has been produced in the conditions to which I referred earlier or in conditions that apply in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has a farm quality assurance scheme that has high product traceability and rigorous production standards. It is wholly wrong that a product that does not meet the same rigorous standards can cost the same as a farm quality assured product. Ultimately, that is not only to the detriment of the producer but the consumer. Consumers are paying for products that do not meet the same rigorous standards of production that apply in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, it is very important that the Assembly should act in the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland and ensure that they are eating what they wish to, rather than something different to what they thought they were buying.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a key role in selling the Northern Ireland brand and building on the brand that we have. Farmers in Northern Ireland currently sell their beef for one of the lowest prices in the United Kingdom, whereas Scottish farmers have the highest price. What is the difference between Scottish beef and Northern Irish beef? The standards applied and the systems carried out are broadly similar — the difference is purely one of branding. Following a marketing exercise, Scottish beef is now seen as green, healthy and the best quality beef in the United Kingdom. In

Northern Ireland, we need to get to a position where our beef is seen as the highest quality in the United Kingdom. We need to match what Scotland has done, which will take a number of years.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in conjunction with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, needs to ensure that the Northern Ireland brand is one of quality and is recognised and sold as such. I am not saying that the brand is British or Irish — there is a distinct Northern Irish brand that we should be selling and marketing. We are a small area that can produce food very well, and we should go for niche marketing to move our economy forward.

I am delighted with the support that the motion has received throughout the Chamber. I am somewhat disappointed that the Sinn Féin Members who spoke did not address the issue and concentrated on an irregularity. I have explained that irregularity, but it is disappointing that they did not take the opportunity to make the case for country-of-origin labelling. Those Members could have made a better case for the people in the rural community whom they represent, and I suspect that their constituents will be disappointed that they did not.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly recognises the importance of adding value to local produce in an increasingly competitive international market; notes the benefits of having rigorous traceability systems; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure the early introduction of accurate country-of-origin labelling based on where animals are reared.

*Adjourned at 5.42 pm.*

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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 10 March 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## MATTERS OF THE DAY

### Murder of a Police Officer in Craigavon

**Mr Speaker:** I have again received notice from party leaders seeking leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call the leaders of each of the parties in order.

**Mr Dodds:** In the absence of the First Minister, who is travelling back to Belfast this morning, I speak on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party.

It is with great sadness that for the second consecutive day, the Assembly gathers following a terrorist outrage. Our thoughts and prayers this morning are with the family of Constable Stephen Carroll, who was so callously murdered last night in the Lismore area of Craigavon.

That gallant police officer was gunned down in a cold-blooded attack as he, with his colleagues, went about the business of protecting and defending the community from criminality in all its forms. His devotion to duty and dedication to the service of the entire community stand in stark contrast to the wickedness and evil of the vile characters who carried out that atrocious deed.

Constable Carroll leaves a wife and young family, at whose grief we can only begin to guess. The DUP unreservedly condemns the evil deed for the heinous crime that it is. Now is the time for the entire community to unite as one to defeat those who would drag the Province back to the past — that unity requires deeds as well as words.

Those who murdered in Antrim and Craigavon must be denied any safe haven. Those with information that can help the security forces in apprehending and prosecuting the murderers must provide it, and those in positions of leadership in politics and in the community must give unequivocal support to the Chief Constable as he faces down this threat. Whatever resources,

whatever forces are required by the Chief Constable in order to eliminate this terrorist threat and to bring security to all our people must be provided, and it is the duty of all parties in this House to be clear and forthright in their support for those necessary actions.

It is right and proper that we speak words of revulsion, horror and, yes, anger at what has happened in recent days. That is what all our people are feeling, and it is right that we reflect that. However, those words must be translated into real and meaningful action, and the information given to the police and carried through so that those people can be brought to justice.

Now more than ever, the police family and those connected with the security forces need to know that all of us — politicians and the community — stand with them in whatever they need to do to prevent evil people from trying to drag us back to the past. The action that needs to be taken must be left to the Chief Constable and to the forces of law and order. There should be no question of people taking the law into their own hands.

What we are facing is, clearly, a fight between evil people who want to tear down democracy and those who stand for law and order. In that battle, there is no room on the sidelines for those who refuse to give their full support to the police, the Army and the security services.

If the terrorists' goal is to destabilise Northern Ireland, they will fail. The progress that has been made in this Province cannot be taken for granted. The shock of these murders is, of course, all the more telling coming after a dozen years without security force fatalities. We are being challenged by those who would seek to destroy the very fabric of democracy, and who would, as in the past, when there was a 30-year campaign of terrorism, seek to impose their warped ideology on the people of Northern Ireland.

Let the message go out loud and clear in these dark days — just as they were defeated in the past, so they will be defeated in the days to come.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr A Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I apologise for the absence of our party leader, Gerry Adams, from the Chamber this morning. People are, of course, also aware that Martin McGuinness is unable to be here at this time.

Therefore, on behalf of Sinn Féin, I would like to express the party's absolute condolences to the family of Constable Carroll on the tragic and very untimely death of their loved one. Obviously, today, there is not a lot of point in rehearsing much of what was said yesterday, and it is important to restate that what was delivered from this Chamber yesterday and, indeed, from society was very much a unity of purpose among all of us: all the parties, the Governments, the police

themselves and all other elements of civic society that have addressed this matter since the weekend.

It is very important that we maintain that unity of purpose. We need to make sure that we give solidarity and sympathy to those families that have been bereaved, and those who have had their loved ones injured, and express our deepest sympathy for their very sad loss.

Last evening, I spoke to the Chief Constable and some of his senior colleagues to express our party condolences, and to express our support for all efforts that we as a community can take collectively to bring to justice the people who carried out those killings.

**Sir Reg Empey:** Today, our primary thoughts are with the family, friends and colleagues of the murdered police officer, and our gratitude goes to all the men and women of our policing and security services who, once again, find themselves on the front line.

Since the mid-1990s, the political representatives of unionism, loyalism, nationalism and republicanism have worked together to create a new way forward for Northern Ireland. Our aim was to deliver political stability and to hand on a peaceful environment to the coming generations — and we did. We built political institutions, in which the governance of Northern Ireland is shared by both traditions; we built a political platform, upon which progress can be sustained and new opportunities developed; and we opened a door to a new future. Of course, there are still difficulties, but there is nothing that cannot be overcome by dialogue, negotiation, compromise and goodwill.

The so-called dissidents fail to appreciate that circumstances here have changed immeasurably and for the better. Indeed, our parties have created a settlement that has been endorsed overwhelmingly by republicans on both sides of the border. Those criminal elements have thrown down the gauntlet to all of us; they have declared war on all people here. However, let me tell them this: there is a new, strong, determined and collective resolve in Northern Ireland; a resolve not to be dragged back to a darker, bloodier world; a resolve from both traditions that they will not be manipulated by the self-serving agenda of those criminal thugs; a resolve that our democratic institutions will not be uprooted; a resolve that the next generation will not be lumbered with the same problems; and a resolve that the people and parties of Northern Ireland will stand together, and together they will face down the forces of terror and anti-democracy.

Mr Speaker, I suspect that as we go about our business today, this dark cloud will hang over us, but there must be no doubt about our resolve to resist.

**Mr Durkan:** I begin by offering sincere condolences to the family of Constable Stephen Carroll, his colleagues and the wider policing family, which serves this community so well and so proudly.

It is important that we reinforce the strong regard and support that we have for all the people in the police service, who, day after day, serve the entire community in so many ways. The attack was designed to intimidate and unnerve them, just as it was designed to daunt and overwhelm those of us who represent the democratic will of the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland.

It is important that those behind the recent atrocities get the message that they will not succeed. They are irredentist, ruthless subversives who are determined to thwart the chosen path of political stability and peaceful accommodation that the Assembly represents. They are determined to subvert the new beginning to policing and all the promise that it offers as a way of ensuring that no armed group can sentence us to the difficulties, tensions and suffering of the past. That is why, in coming times, we must keep our nerve on both the political front and the policing front.

It is not only those in the Police Service who are confronted with the spectre of past days. People in the Health Service, who must cope with so many other matters and who work miracles every day, must again confront and deal with callously, deliberately and calculatedly created trauma. For them, too, there is a sense of being put back into situations that they thought were well behind them, so I hope that the Health Minister will communicate to all the people in his charge that there is a strong appreciation of the vocational strain and of the prospect of the situation deteriorating that recent events have created for them.

We must make it clear that the people involved have managed to bring representatives of international and network media back to our region, some of whom have not been here before.

Some of the reports state that the power-sharing Executive and the Assembly are wobbling. There is no wobble here today. There is a strong, determined resolve across all the parties — as was reflected yesterday. The word and the message needs to go out to the people: do not listen to the headlines or the twists that people are saying in the media; listen to the plain, honest truth of all the elected representatives of all the people of the North here in the Chamber.

*10.45 am*

Those people who want to undermine, set back or divide us will not succeed. Whatever twisted agenda those people come up with, and whatever further atrocities they seek to create, must be met by a united and determined resolve, showing them that they will not divide us and that they will not create contentions and difficulties in and around the fabric and character that we have chosen for our society.

As we send our sympathy to the family of Constable Carroll, and as we express our support to all in the

policing family and all who support them and serve them in so many ways, let us remember that there are many victims from the past who recent events have touched in a difficult way. They feel stabbed, yet again, with the sense of the futility of their loss. In many ways, they feel hurt by the memory that they were denied the unanimity of condemnation and resolve that the victims of recent days have met. Therefore, as we talk about the events of recent days and the response, let us be careful not to create false differentiations between the nature of the crimes that have been committed in recent days and the nature of the crimes that were visited on people in the past and which victimised so many people in the past, because that creates hurt and difficulty. Let us be measured and sensitive, but let us be absolutely determined and totally united.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Ford:** On behalf of my colleagues in the Alliance Party, I express sympathy to the wife, children and family circle of Stephen Carroll. Constable Carroll died as a civilian policeman, serving every part of this community — as his colleagues were doing in every part of Northern Ireland yesterday and as colleagues of his were doing in Antrim on Saturday.

The united response that we have seen to the attack and the support for the police family — as they see themselves — in carrying out their work, is a measure of how much this society has changed. It is important that a message of clear and unanimous support goes out from this place today.

I welcome the comments that were made on radio this morning by Sir Desmond Rea, chairperson of the Policing Board, Sir Hugh Orde, the Chief Constable, and Terry Spence, chairman of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland. Each of them said in different ways that we have a new arrangement here; we have a new civilianised police service that works with the community to serve the community. That is something that we must not lose — whatever the difficulties of the days in which we stand. There is a message and a lesson there for us all.

Although we assemble in sombre mood in a busy Chamber for the second day in a row, it is good that we take time to share our thoughts and that we have the same thoughts — regardless of which part of the political spectrum we come from. It is necessary that that message goes not only to the terrorists, but to the community, because the community is suffering as well and is unsure of what is to happen.

Many people are unsure about what they can do. It is clear that some people will have information, which they may not know is important. However, they can pass that information to the police and do what they can to help to bring the perpetrators to justice. For other people, it may be the case that they should

simply co-operate with the police service in its normal duties to make life easier and to spare resources so that they can go into catching the terrorists.

It is hoped that the call from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions for a silent demonstration at lunchtime tomorrow will give many people the opportunity to show the mood of this community, because I believe that we are entirely representative of this community as we stand united in the Chamber this morning in saying that there must be an end to this. There must be no bowing to the terrorists.

We have a settlement that is supported by, in the words of the Chief Constable, something like 99.99% of the population. There must be no going back, and the will of a united community, with its police service and its political representatives, is the way that we will ensure that there is no going back. We have to build on that mood in the coming days, and we have to show that democracy in this place and the rule of law throughout Northern Ireland can overcome whatever terrorists may throw at us.

**Ms Purvis:** I begin by extending my sympathies and those of my party to the family of Constable Stephen Carroll. I send my condolences to the Chief Constable and his colleagues in the wider police family, and I pledge my party's support for the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Our message today is the same as it was yesterday, it will be the same tomorrow, and it will be the same the next day: we are united, as a community and as politicians, in our condemnation of, and opposition to, these criminals.

There is a real fear and anger in the community. It is palpable, and it reminds us to be careful of the language that we use in the coming days. Those emotions of fear and anger need to be channelled positively. People should not react to these criminals but should respond by channelling these emotions positively and drawing strength from our unity of purpose, which is to make further political progress. People can channel their energy by helping and supporting the police to do their job, so that they can take these people off the streets, and they can show their united condemnation at the rally that is planned for 1.00 pm tomorrow at Belfast City Hall.

Politics is the way forward for our country; we will not be deflected from that.

**Mr Speaker:** We all left this House yesterday and did not believe that we would be reflecting on another terrible tragedy so soon. I ask all Members to stand for one minute's reflection on the matters spoken about this morning and yesterday morning, as an expression of our support for all those affected by the events of the past three days.

*Members observed one minute's silence.*

## **SPEAKER'S BUSINESS**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I would like to inform the House that I will be absent on Monday 16 March, as I will be away on official Assembly business.

## **MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

### **Department for Employment and Learning's Response to the Economic Downturn**

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister for Employment and Learning that he wishes to make a statement on the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) response to the economic downturn.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. After the words that have been spoken, it is difficult to focus on ordinary business. However, we must focus on ordinary business, if the words that we have just expressed are to mean anything.

I want to bring Members up to date on a number of issues that have been happening in the past few weeks, but, perhaps, have not been brought together in one place. I felt that it would be useful to inform the House of the steps that my Department has taken to deal with the recession. I want to reaffirm the focus that I and my Executive colleagues are placing on the economy and the people affected by the recession.

I aim to show my commitment to those individuals by providing concrete actions to minimise the impact that the global downturn will have on their livelihoods and to ensure that Northern Ireland maintains a solid skills base and takes the opportunity to improve skills upon which to rebuild and strengthen our economy. As Members know, the Executive are committed to doing all that they can to protect local people and businesses from the worst effects of the economic downturn. That is demonstrated by the fact that the downturn is a standing item of Executive business. However, it is essential to have strategic long-term goals that provide the fundamental support required.

Recently, I made a number of announcements about extra help for employees and employers. I will update Members on those new measures and their implications in the present downturn. My Department will shortly be completing a timely review of our Success through Skills strategy, to ensure that we prioritise and target our resources to positively impact and support employers, employees and the unemployed in these times of unprecedented challenge and change, and, just as importantly, to focus Northern Ireland's competitiveness up to 2020.

My Department focuses on the needs of the people. I want to make it totally clear that my Department is not responsible for job creation or job losses. However, my Department is responsible for creating and maintaining a highly skilled and well-educated workforce. I aim to ensure that people have the right tools in order to avail themselves of the jobs that are available and to upskill the workforce so that Northern Ireland is in a

strong position to take advantage of the upturn when it comes.

My Department is about people, skills and jobs. It is about a dynamic and innovative sustainable economy in which everyone achieves their full potential. People are at the heart of the solution, as there is no magic wand that we can wave to get us out of the global downturn. A recession is not the time to back away from training, but a time to keep it firmly on the agenda. With that in mind, I have put in place a series of planned actions that will not be just for the here and now, but for the long term. By aligning skills to employers' needs and addressing barriers to employment, we can bolster productivity, make good our deficit in essential skills, and upgrade our higher-level skills so that we are fit to compete in a global marketplace.

My Department has, therefore, prioritised its work into three main categories: employers, employees and the unemployed. I will work closely with the new employment and skills adviser so that my Department can respond quickly and flexibly to needs as they arise.

I will deal first with employers. There is widespread recognition that the skills of our workforce play a vital role in raising productivity and increasing the competitiveness of Northern Ireland companies. In 'Success through Skills: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland', we identified for the first time the scale of the problem across the entire skills spectrum; from the need to improve the levels of numeracy and literacy, through upskilling, to further development of management and leadership skills for companies large and small.

11.00 am

As part of the FE Means Business strategy, we created the six workforce-development forums to focus on meeting local skills needs. Those forums are led by employers and serviced by the further education colleges, whose role is to respond to identified skills needs in their respective areas.

A subgroup of the Economic Development Forum recently provided advice on skills during this downturn. In response, a partnership has been established between the National Skills Academy of Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (SEMTA) and the six regional colleges in order to upskill college lecturers in business improvement techniques. The colleges, the National Skills Academy and local employers are now working together to plan the delivery of that course to their workforces.

At this stage, 19 companies in the manufacturing sector are involved, with the aim of 5,000 employees receiving an NVQ level 2 or 3 in business improvement techniques over the next two years. DEL has undertaken to cover the cost of the training, which makes it free at the point of delivery for the companies involved. Obviously, partnerships are key to delivery, and I am

delighted that my Department and Invest Northern Ireland have worked together to ensure that the course is attractive to employers and employees alike.

The initiative is expected to deliver important improvements in individual company manufacturing processes, which are all the more critical given the current economic climate. The management and leadership skills of the workforce are also essential. In many cases, it will be those skills that will help our companies to navigate the challenges that lie ahead and to seize the opportunities that will arrive as a result of the eventual economic upturn, recognising the predominance in Northern Ireland of small and medium-sized enterprises and their particular needs.

Such skills are also known to be a key driver of increased economic productivity. For those reasons, from 2 March until the end of 2009 only, my Department will cover all the training costs in all its approved management and leadership development programmes. That package amounts to an investment of £2 million. That enhanced level of financial support will enable Northern Ireland's small to medium-sized companies to improve their managerial and leadership skills through participation in the suite of programmes that are offered by the Department.

It must not be forgotten that employers still need to recruit. An employment service is available in order to assist employers to fill vacancies and, in some cases, to provide subsidies to employers who recruit people who are unemployed.

Turning to employees — skills are also important in promoting social inclusion, because they provide individuals with a route to stable employment, better wages and long-term prosperity, as well as to personal development and fulfilment. What I have described for employers obviously focuses on individuals in the workforce, whose upskilling is the single most important investment that an employer can make.

I am particularly pleased by the uptake of adult apprenticeships. Of the 4,903 apprentices who commenced the programme since September 2008, almost 45% are aged 25 or over. Since the essential skills strategy began in 2002, more than 37,000 qualifications have been achieved across Northern Ireland. Evidence shows that people with those skills have improved outcomes in many areas of their lives. Many of those improvements are intangible, including greater self-esteem and a growing sense of aspiration. There are also measurable outcomes in respect of sustained employment, career progression and increased income.

My Department has now incorporated information and communication technology (ICT) in the essential skills offer in order to ensure that employees can use language, numbers and ICT effectively in the workplace. Those are fundamental skills to provide the self-

confidence and self-management ability to think and to solve problems, to communicate and to work together in order to drive forward business productivity and profit.

The integrated all-age career strategy, 'Preparing for success: careers education, information, advice and guidance', launched by myself and the Minister of Education, Ms Ruane, last month, is another example of how interdepartmental working can ensure that people are well-supported and given the best possible advice regardless of their age, whether they are still at school and deciding their future path, in work and upskilling or have recently been made redundant and are considering retraining.

These are life-changing times and life-changing decisions. Already, 23 new careers advisers have been employed to ensure that the actions that are outlined in the strategy are implemented and to ensure that young people and adults receive a better service.

Members will be aware that the dramatic increase in the number of people who claim jobseeker's allowance has created and placed significant pressure on us. Unemployment here has now reached 5.1%. To address that, I have provided additional support to front line services. Indeed, the 23 new careers advisers about whom I have just spoken have been augmenting the services that are available. In addition, processes in jobs and benefits offices have been reviewed and improved to ensure rapid response, and where necessary, measures such as overtime and Saturday opening have been used. The impact of continuing changes to the unemployment pattern is being monitored constantly to make sure that needs are being met.

However, there are barriers. My Department continues to assist the unemployed and economically inactive to take part in employment and training programmes. In addressing the barriers that they face, I am pleased to announce additional initiatives to enhance the support that is available to those who take part in the Steps to Work programme and in other employment and training programmes that are administered by my Department.

The cost of childcare is an important factor in the decision of many lone parents and partners to take part in employment and training programmes. Assistance towards the cost of childcare for lone parents and certain other participants — mainly spouses or partners of benefit claimants — who avail themselves of Steps to Work and other departmental programmes will be increased from 6 April 2009. The maximum amount available will increase from £140 for each family each week to £240 for each family each week when care is provided by registered care, and it will increase from £85 for each family each week to £100 for each family each week when care is provided by a relative. The revised rates of childcare support will particularly help lone parents and the economically inactive to prepare

for work and enable them to move off benefits. It will contribute to achieving the Executive priorities of increasing the employment rate to 75% by 2020 and of eradicating child poverty by the same date.

The present economic downturn has reduced greatly the number of suitable accessible work placements for Steps to Work participants. Contracted providers are increasingly experiencing difficulty in finding suitable placements in their local areas. To ease the excess travel-cost burden on contracted providers, additional assistance will be given towards travel costs to facilitate work placements for participants beyond their local areas.

My Department offers Steps to Work participants the opportunity to undertake a short training course that is aimed at increasing their employability by developing new occupational skills and obtaining qualifications. That is particularly useful for those who are job ready but who may lack specific vocational skills or qualifications that would enhance their prospects of finding and sustaining employment. A typical course that a participant may undertake — for example, basic IT qualifications, hygiene certificates or construction skills registration — may last up to a period of 10 days and attract funding of £30 each day, which is £300 in total.

From 6 April 2009, I will approve additional Steps to Work funding for contracted providers for training costs. The upper limit will be raised to £2,000 from the current funding level of £300. That will enable them to provide access to a range of appropriate short training courses that will address the needs of a changing client base, such as those from technical and professional occupations who now find themselves out of work and face the need to upskill or reskill.

In conclusion, the key to working through the current difficult situation is never to lose focus of the needs of the individual. My Department will continue to work with other Departments and agencies to develop actions that will provide every individual with the opportunity to develop and reach his or her maximum potential. In doing so, I believe that we can achieve the vision in the Executive's Programme for Government of a dynamic and innovative economy that can attract and retain investment on our shores.

The difference between winning and losing lies in the enhanced skills and motivation of our people, which is imperative for our long-term competitiveness and prosperity as a society.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and go raibh maith agat to the Minister for his statement.

On behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I commend the Minister and his

departmental officials on the measures that have been taken. Although those measures are to be welcomed, they deal largely with people who are still in work. What actions have the Minister, his Department and his Executive colleagues taken to preserve the skills of those who are no longer in work? In that way, we can ensure that we utilise resources and best practice rather than allow people who have been paid off to sit idle.

Has the Minister considered doing away with the waiting period before the unemployed can access jobseeker's allowance and other programmes such as Steps to Work? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In my statement, I said that we had to address the full spectrum of issues, not only for employers but for others. We must upskill people who are in work to try to ensure that they do not become unemployed, but we must also address the issues faced by those who are already unemployed. Childcare can be a barrier that prevents somebody who is not in work from entering the workforce. The honourable Member will know better than most that that is the case. We have tried to provide the means by which a lone parent can find it financially viable to return to work, because many people face challenges.

To illustrate what is happening at the moment, I will take the example of a lone parent and their partner. If the partner loses their job, that can put extra pressure on the female in the household, and the temptation is then for the partner to try to find work. An increase in childcare support is one mechanism that we can use to help to break down that barrier.

I will write to the Member about the waiting period that she mentioned, because I want to consider some of the issues involved. There is no question that we are focused on people, whether they are in work or not. Sadly, I am expecting the next set of unemployment figures to emerge next week. That will be quite a testing period for us, because if the rate of increase is the same as it has been up to now, there will be more pressure on all of us. I have lists of the numbers of vacancies that arise in our offices in each district, and some of them are in single figures. That gives some idea of the challenges that we face.

**Mr Newton:** I welcome the Minister's statement. However, much of the information it contained is already in the public domain. That said, the additional funding for the Steps to Work programme and the childcare initiatives is to be welcomed.

I listened to the Minister's statement, but I noted nothing in it that will address the problems that companies, particularly manufacturing companies, face in an economic downturn. All the steps that the Minister has taken are for the future rather than for today.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** At the start of my statement, I said that I would mention a number of measures that had been put in place. However, because of their nature and the fact that not everybody picked up on them, I felt that it was important to bring details of them collectively to the House, particularly when they were part of a series of initiatives.

We recognise the challenges that face a number of local companies, but the Member will know that some management and leadership courses and so on are being delivered to the employer free of charge at the point of delivery. Therefore, I do not accept that there is no focus on those companies. However, there is no question that we are looking at other measures to help those companies. We must also remember that the next tranche of graduates will be coming out of universities in the summer. Will there be jobs for them? They represent a huge talent pool, but what are we going to do with those young people? We are looking at a whole range of measures that could help employers.

11.15 am

We are also watching very closely what is happening in London, as the Department for Work and Pensions made announcements in the past few days about making assistance available. Therefore, we are very focused on the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises in particular.

The Member drew attention to the manufacturing side. I think that the relevance and significance of manufacturing is now coming home to more and more people. However, some years ago, everyone was saying that we should go for financial services and for some of the new service industries. That was fine up to a point, but where are many of those service industries and financial-services sector businesses now? I think that any economy that does not emphasise maintaining a significant manufacturing base is doing a grave disservice to future generations.

**Mr McClarty:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree that, notwithstanding the short-term costs, there is clear evidence that firms that provide training are more likely to survive in the long run?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Only the other week, I was pleased to be in Coleraine, which is in the honourable Member's constituency, for the launch of a very important initiative. He and other Members will have grasped that I have pointed out repeatedly that it is easy for me and for other Members to stand in the House and say that companies should continue to train their employees. However, we do not have to manage the cash flow of companies, nor do we have to find the wages on Fridays. It is easy for us to sit here and say that those companies should continue to spend when we do not face those challenges. However, all the evidence points to the fact that companies that

maintain the training and upskilling of their workforces are two and a half times more likely to survive a recession than companies that do not maintain such training and upskilling.

As I said, those of us who have been in business and have had to meet those challenges know that any time that we were stuck for cash, we had to look at the easy targets where cuts could be made — for example, in training, marketing or maintenance — and the same applies to the public sector. Many Members who have sat on education and library boards will know that when budgets were being tightened, the first thing that was done was to cut back on maintenance, with the result that windows were not replaced, for example. That is how businesses operate. However, businesses that can maintain investment in their workforces are two and a half times more likely to survive than companies that cannot maintain that investment.

**Mr Attwood:** I welcome the Minister's statement. I hope that he will address the House at least every two months during the recession to update us on what is happening with the issues that fall under his responsibility.

I welcome the information about the uptake in apprenticeships for adults who are over the age of 25. The Committee for Employment and Learning urged the Minister to adopt that action, and it is very welcome. However, is the Minister not disappointed that Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE), which is a premier employer in Northern Ireland, made £100 million in profit last year and anticipates making a further £100 million in profit this year, yet it indicated to the Committee for Employment and Learning just last week that it may suspend its apprenticeship programme in September? Is the Minister not disappointed that such a profitable organisation may take that sort of measure?

The Minister told the Committee for Employment and Learning two weeks ago that there may be a case for revisiting some targets. However, does he accept that it is now time not just to revisit the targets but to revisit the Budget in order to ensure that his Department and other Departments spend taxpayers' money for maximum benefit during this time of recession?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I am pleased to attend the House and to keep Members updated at any stage, and I am happy to consider doing so on a more regular basis if the Committee would find that helpful.

The programme of adult apprenticeships has, undoubtedly, been a success. People over the age barrier of 25, and, indeed, people in their 50s are participating, so there may be hope for us all. Adult apprenticeships have been a very positive development. I visited a training centre in the Nutts Corner area in which linesmen were being trained. I was also very impressed by an apprenticeship school that I visited there.

I will be very disappointed if such training were to be threatened in any way. We rely heavily on companies that are successful and that are weathering the storm. This is for the good of those companies — it is not for our benefit; it is for the benefit of their bottom lines. I cannot think of anything more likely to weaken their future business — other than some enormous crisis — than not training apprentices. There was a period when apprenticeships were phased out across many sectors of business and industry, and it is only in recent years that people have realised that that was a mistake and have learned the lessons.

Some of our bigger companies, such as Bombardier Shorts, will openly admit that they would probably no longer be in existence had they not continued to invest in apprenticeships. I very much hope that the company to which the Member refers will revisit its decision, and my Department will be happy to be in touch with that company to clarify the position.

**Ms Lo:** I very much welcome the Minister's statement, and I thank him for briefing us on developments. I commend the Minister on the various initiatives that have been developed and adopted in the economic downturn. Indeed, that is the benefit of having a local devolved Administration — to meet our local community's needs swiftly.

I fully agree with his comments about training programmes. I ran an organisation comprising 15 staff for 10 years and I know that training programmes are often the first thing to go when the budget is tight. I commend the different initiatives that are being introduced to encourage employers to continue training staff, because literacy, leadership and management skills are key to our economy.

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to come to her question.

**Ms Lo:** OK; I will ask a question.

Further education colleges are also key to upskilling our workforce — will the Minister update us on the lecturers' pay dispute?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member is being very innovative. *[Laughter.]*

Of course, we believe in innovation in this place. Negotiations have reached a critical and sensitive stage. Proposals have been made to the trade unions by the employers' side, and I await a response. It would be inappropriate for me to say any more today because of the delicacy of that position.

However, if we consider the further education colleges in general, we find that they play a critical part. Look at what local further education colleges are doing: every one of them has drawn up a specific programme to deal with the recession in its respective area. Some of their ideas are innovative; they are being

flexible in the times at which they schedule classes and in the courses that they make available. This matter has not received the attention that it deserves, but they all have come forward with packages. I will find some way of informing Members about that.

I beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker, to respond to two points, which were made by Mr Attwood. One point was about revisiting targets. I have made it clear that, in general, the Executive must be mindful of their targets. Mr Attwood also asked me about the Budget. The Executive discuss the economy at every meeting now, and we discussed it briefly last week. The whole issue of targets will be continuously reviewed.

As far as the Budget is concerned, there are, at present, elements that we cannot quantify. As Members are aware, the Prime Minister and the Treasury have indicated that some resources might be taken away from us. That matter is not resolved, and until it is, it is difficult for us to know where we are going with the overall Budget. All those matters are being reviewed, and it is, sadly, obvious that some of our targets are beyond reach in the timetable set.

That is not to say that we ought not to set ambitious targets. However, one of the most obvious targets that we will fail to meet is the reduction of child poverty by 50% by next year. That is a huge challenge, and my colleague the Minister for Social Development will shortly be dealing with one aspect of it — the fuel payments scheme — which was designed to intervene directly in that area. I reassure Mr Attwood that we are prepared to review targets.

**Mr Hilditch:** I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. Will he give us an assessment of the fostering scheme for apprentices who face redundancy? To date, the Committee for Employment and Learning has received little evidence that that has been successful. Even last week, when representatives of Northern Ireland Electricity attended the Committee, the representatives in charge of the company's apprenticeship scheme said that they had never heard of fostering. That came as a great surprise to us, considering the standards that NIE applies.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** As Members will know, we have a series of measures to help apprentices who are facing difficulty. The Department has contacted a number of employers to see whether they would be interested. We received positive responses from several of them. I cannot say whether NIE was one of those, but other responses have definitely been received.

We have a menu of options that can be used. The question for us is: what measure is appropriate? During the most recent Employment and Learning questions for oral answer, I gave the House statistics on what has happened to apprentices who have been made redundant.

The Member — or another Member — asked me questions about that, and I supplied answers. We have managed to deal with apprentices through other parts of the scheme. However, that remains an issue.

I must tell Members that if the recession lasts the whole of this year and a part of next year, we must lay plans for every eventuality that we can anticipate. I refer even to students who will graduate from university this year.

We have to prepare places for them as best we can. That is the context in which the Member needs to view that issue. The fact is that we have had positive responses. If we can deal with the client and the customer through other means, that is fine. So far, we have been able to process most people through that mechanism. If we need to use the fostering scheme, we will do so.

11.30 am

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. As has already been mentioned, over the past couple of weeks, we have heard about childcare issues, travel costs and unemployed graduates. However, for the Minister to say that the Department for Employment and Learning is not responsible for job creation, but rather for creating a highly skilled workforce, sends out the message that each Department is looking after only its own responsibilities, and that there is no joined-up thinking around creating jobs or upskilling.

It is better to explain that point through an example: John Lewis, which is planned to be built in Lagan Valley, and is now subject to a decision by the Planning Appeals Commission, has the potential to create a couple of thousand jobs. In England, John Lewis has retail academies —

**Mr Speaker:** Do you have a question?

**Mr Butler:** Yes, I do, Mr Speaker. The Minister should be taking a joined-up approach to John Lewis, and to other projects. Although it is not primarily the responsibility of the DEL Minister, there should be a focus on trying to create jobs in that area.

Last week, NIE gave evidence to the Committee —

**Mr Speaker:** Can we have the question please?

**Mr Butler:** One of the areas in which NIE is lacks jobs is in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) areas such as electrical engineering. Is the Minister trying to think outside the box and get some joined-up thinking on that?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I am merely stating the Department's remit in respect of job creation. There are formal protocols with Invest NI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), and that joint team meets on a

regular basis. Those meetings are pre-planned, not ad hoc. When I said to the Executive that I wished to make this statement, all Ministers said that, although they understood that things were difficult, there are still some positive things happening in the economy. Indeed there are: in the past few weeks, there have been some good announcements from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, all of which are to be welcomed.

In conjunction with Invest NI, we contact the companies that are coming here — for example, John Lewis or Citi — and ascertain their training needs. We already do that. When companies announce that they are coming here, we do not wait for them to come to us; we go to them. That already happens. If John Lewis gets planning permission, we would, undoubtedly, with Invest NI, go to the company to ascertain its requirements — we would work with the company. In the past, we have run courses specifically for a particular company — such as Nortel — and we will do that again. We do that without problem, and I am very happy to do it.

The Member made a point about STEM subjects and, of course, he is right. At the moment, I am looking at how we define the STEM subject areas, because we do not want that definition to be too narrow. For example, in our economic profile there is a significant agriculture and agrifood sector. We have to make sure that the definition of STEM is not drawn so narrowly that it excludes potential job creation opportunities. The Member is correct, and that is one of our key challenges as we go forward. It is an area where there is beginning to be a bit of improvement; however, there is clearly a long way to go.

**Mr Irwin:** I also thank the Minister for his statement. Will he agree that there is a two-tier system of apprenticeship training in that some apprentices get first-class training while others are less fortunate? That is largely dependent on the employer, and the Minister's statement did not address that matter.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Generally speaking, programmes that are run and operated by the Department are subject to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate. I know that the Committee for Employment and Learning is watching closely for early signs that contractors are operating the new programmes effectively. However, the Department is not in control of training that is delivered by individual employers.

There is no doubt that the available training ranges from state-of-the-art to nothing, and the Member will know that. Sadly, one or two employers still take a negative attitude. For example, in private conversation, an employer asked why he would want to train employee A or employee X, given that that employee might ask for more money or go to work for a competitor. That

attitude, although not widespread, does exist, and there is huge variation among employers.

The Department cannot intervene in a private company's training programme, but, when companies involve us, we can ensure that there is a standard. I accept the Member's point that there is huge variation among employers; some of them are excellent and provide first-class facilities, and others fall short. If employers feel that the Department can offer any help or advice, they need only lift the phone.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I congratulate the Minister on the scope of his statement. Will he confirm that DEL's target to have 10,000 apprenticeships by 2010 has been attained early?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Recently, in answer to a question, I said that the Department had set a target of 10,000 apprenticeships by 2010. I remember a debate in the House in early 2008 when I was asked to withdraw that target because, at that stage, it looked unachievable as 6,000 apprentices were in training. I am happy to say that the most recent figures show that around 10,243 apprentices were in training, and that figure will vary.

In my statement, I said that the number of adult apprenticeships was showing encouraging growth. I said that the Committee's recommendation and the Department's decision to go ahead with the increase in age has been a major success. Given the gloom that has surrounded the economy in recent months, we are pleased to have achieved that target. However, we have passed that target and moved on. We want to increase the number of apprenticeships because that is the way forward. It is another matter whether the target will be revisited or whether a higher target will be set. We have achieved the target, and we have done so ahead of time.

**Mr Dallat:** I also welcome the Minister's statement, and I welcome his sincerity in how he presented it. In his opening remarks, he said that he was not responsible for job creation or job losses, and I am sure that he is very pleased about that. I represent a constituency that has lost over 3,000 jobs in the past two years, and I cannot find a sense of crisis or emergency in the statement. Indeed, without causing any offence, the statement could have been made any time in the past decade.

Will the Minister assure the House that there is a sense of cohesion between him and the other Ministers who have a more direct responsibility for job creation? People outside do not sense that the Assembly fully realises the crisis that we are in. Without criticising the Minister's statement, will he elaborate on how seriously the other Ministers are taking the crisis?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In my statement, I said that I was merely bringing Members up to date on a number of measures that

have been taken in recent weeks, largely because it is hit-and-miss about how much publicity those measures receive.

Although we have gone through that, and coverage has been given to each individual measure, it is appropriate that Members are brought up to date and given a comprehensive view of what the Department is doing. As I said in my response to the Member for West Belfast, I am happy to come back to the Chamber in order to keep Members informed. That is one job that a Minister should do.

The Executive have put that item at the top of every agenda. We circulate a matrix document weekly or every time that we have a meeting. Each Department that has an economic remit updates those figures. Ministers contribute to that each time that a meeting is held. Much of the Executive's discussion centres on the current situation and the financial pressures that arise from it, one of which I mentioned earlier. As regards my Department, we have sat down at the table and discussed how we can think outside the box. We have asked what we can do differently, what else we can do and whether we can bring our work together.

My Department has started initiatives with local authorities, including that of the Member. Two weeks ago, activity took place in his constituency. We have worked with other local councils to ensure that we can improve individuals' employability. At present, we are working with Larne Borough Council, and that work will be rolled out to other councils. It covers simple matters such as how to fill out curriculum vitae and informs people properly about how they should present themselves for interview. Although it is basic stuff, it is important.

Although there is a sense of urgency, I do not believe that there is a sense of panic. The Department works closely with Invest NI and DETI on those measures. I also work with the Department of Education because there is a clear linkage to schools. Therefore, "cohesion", which was the word that the Member used, is growing. At the start of the crisis, it was the case, perhaps, that Departments did their own thing. As a long-time critic of that over the years, I believe that there is now more "joined-upness" than there was previously. All Ministers realise that none of us, by and large, can act unilaterally. We can all do our own bits and pieces; however, unless there is an overall plan, there will be no progress.

Therefore, I am confident that cohesion now exists. Certainly, there is a sense of urgency. That is clear when the Executive discuss the economy at their meetings.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Does the Minister believe that the success of the tripartite model among local trainers, employers and the jobs and benefits office in Newtownabbey is a model of good practice? If so, does he intend to roll that out to other parts of Northern

Ireland? Is best practice in training aimed towards meeting the economic crisis and recession?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The position in jobs and benefits offices is evolving. Many of them have faced workload increases of over 100%. In the past nine months, the worst caseload increase has been around 150% or 160%, which creates huge problems. I am aware that, a couple of weeks ago, the Committee visited Newtownabbey to see what happens there. Obviously, the Department is considering the roll-out potential of that and other schemes.

The Department must also consider how each office manages the situation. Office staff are required to carry out certain functions under law, to adhere to departmental guidance and to emulate good practice. Given the pressure that has been applied, the Department has granted authority to the managers of those offices, who must assess whether they need more overtime or more staff; or whether they need to re-prioritise. Managers have been given flexibility on those matters. The Department works closely with its colleagues in the Social Security Agency because its offices and jobs and benefits offices are, in the main, joint offices.

The Department has also brought Careers Service Northern Ireland more into play. As I said in my statement, and as Members are aware, 23 extra careers advisers have been employed to help the service.

To answer the Member's question: we are definitely responding at a local level. If the Newtownabbey model is successful — which I believe it will be — the examples of good practice that we learn from that office, or other offices, will be used in the rest of the network.

11.45 am

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Mortgage-Rescue Plan

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

**Mr F McCann:** I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the increasing levels of house repossession and calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a mortgage-rescue plan as soon as possible.

A Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. Over the past year, we have all witnessed the huge growth in the number of people who have been taken to court for falling behind with mortgage payments. I am sure that all Members have heard horror stories about people who believed that they were in stable employment but lost their jobs, and, when only two months in arrears, were pursued by mortgage lenders, brought to court and, in many instances, lost their homes.

How many Members have been approached by constituents who have difficulties with mortgage payments because they have taken out a second mortgage in order to carry out work to their home? Such people were encouraged by building societies that offered them cheap loans, but they overextended themselves and now face losing their homes. How many Members have seen the adverts that ask people to tap into the finance in their home only to discover that those same organisations are now taking possession of their home?

Furthermore, other lenders prey on people who fall into desperate financial difficulties and see no way out. Those people are being offered a price for their home that is, perhaps, 20% or more below its market value, with the option to rent the house back. Thereafter, they find that they are in deeper trouble and will lose their home anyway.

On 28 February 2008, the Minister for Social Development said that she would introduce a mortgage relief scheme to assist people in difficulties. That was widely welcomed, and many people thought that the scheme would be available soon in order to assist people in their hour of need. Unfortunately, that did not happen. It is now 10 March 2009, and we have only a vague promise that a scheme has been drawn up and will be introduced at some stage.

Many people have been advised to take money-management advice from an adviser in their building society only to find that it cost £200. I have been in building societies in which I have seen people who merely want to pay their mortgage being asked to discuss taking out a loan on the strength of the equity in their home. How many people have been tempted to borrow additional unnecessary finance in that way? It is heartbreaking to deal with people who have been trapped in that way and who feel that they have nowhere to turn. They wait in hope that something will turn up and rescue them from their financial mess. Unfortunately, the situation normally worsens.

I commend the Housing Rights Service for its excellent work — especially on debt counselling — in assisting those people. The service must be supported with enhanced resources in order to address the hugely increased workload visited on it by the current circumstances. I recently attended the launch of a scheme that is jointly run by the Housing Rights Service and the Court Service through which legal advice and representation will be provided at the Courts of Justice and Liganside Courts to offer proper support for people who appear in court for mortgage repossession. The main piece of advice that the Housing Rights Service offers is that people must seek advice at the earliest possible stage. That is the best way forward.

The Department's consultation document of September 2008 stated that front line advice services were critical to the success of the mortgage-rescue scheme. However, the document continues by saying that the Department would seek funding for one additional post only. How can one post address a problem of that scale? A complete package is required, including several professional advice workers, under the auspices of the Housing Rights Service and the community sector, in order to resource the provision of a Six County-wide training programme. If we are saying that early advice and intervention is crucial, we need to properly resource that.

The huge increase in actions from mortgage defaults, which have totalled 3,628 over the past year, is an indictment on the inactivity of the Department for Social Development (DSD). How many of those people could have been saved had a scheme been brought to the House early last year? The Minister states that she has made a bid in several of the monitoring rounds for funding for a mortgage-relief scheme, but nothing was forthcoming. That, again, is a "blame everybody else" scenario.

The £50 million moved from the Social Security Agency capital programme in — I believe — the June monitoring round and reallocated for housing should have provided an opportunity to initially fund a mortgage-relief scheme. Had several million of that been moved to fund the advice package, many more people may still have been in their homes.

Last week I asked the Minister of Finance whether — if additional moneys became available — he would direct those towards such a scheme to help those in trouble. He did not rule it out. However, he did say that the Minister for Social Development had the ability to de-prioritise some elements of her budget to deal with the issue. The Minister for Social Development needs to explain why that did not happen. Tens of millions of pounds have been allocated over all monitoring rounds, and not one penny has been directed to deal with the ever-worsening crisis.

**Mr A Maginness:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr F McCann:** No. We already said that co-ownership should play a role in the shared-equity side of any scheme. Why is it that those in negative equity are being excluded from tapping into the scheme? That is a matter of huge concern to us. Surely, the vast majority of those in trouble at the moment and who will be over the next few years, are and will be people in negative equity. The nature of the overheating in the housing market meant that most people paid house prices at the top of the market, and therefore need assistance to stay in their homes.

We, in Sinn Féin, were supportive of the move to lower the length of time — from 26 weeks to 13 weeks — to allow those on benefits to seek help in paying the interest on their mortgages. We also believe that that did not go far enough. If people cannot meet their mortgage payments, it would be of great help for them to be able to tap directly into benefit assistance sooner rather than later. It would also remove the need for unscrupulous moneylenders, from whom some seek assistance at such times.

Sinn Féin cannot understand why the Minister would say, on the one hand, that the purpose of any scheme would be to keep people in their homes, and, on the other hand, demand vacant possession of their homes when housing associations move in to buy the home.

People losing their homes join an ever-lengthening waiting list. If the common selection scheme becomes an obstacle, it should be reviewed and changed to deal with this emergency. The house would not have been available in the first place except for the unusual and exceptional circumstances. To put people through the emotional stress of losing their homes, when, with some imagination and intelligent resourcing, that could have been averted, simply does not make sense. Neither does it seem logical to increase the 40,000 people already on the waiting list in such circumstances.

The Minister has an immediate responsibility to introduce a mortgage-relief scheme, and that must happen forthwith. She also needs to address the issue of those losing their homes who do not fall under the scheme, so that repossession is prevented where at all possible. We await with interest the introduction of the

package of resources, which will, hopefully, address the needs of many in these difficult times. *Tacaím leis an rún. Go raibh maith agat.*

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch):** The Committee for Social Development has considered proposals for the mortgage-rescue scheme at a number of meetings. The Committee welcomes the idea of a mortgage-rescue scheme, not just in its own right, but as part of a raft of measures to help hard-working families hold on to their homes.

The members of the Committee were alarmed by the increasing number of repossessions and believe that those would disproportionately affect people from working-class areas, who also experience high levels of other forms of debt. A mortgage-rescue scheme is essential to provide much-needed support for those largely working-class homeowners who have worked hard to purchase their homes, and have a limited number of options for dealing with other forms of debt.

The Committee was also concerned about the practices of unscrupulous companies that exploit homeowners who face financial problems. Members were appalled that some companies buy homes at well-below market value, negotiate a short-term rental agreement with the former owners, and then evict them. That leaves the former owner at the bottom of the property ladder with a poor credit history, and, therefore, little prospect of ever again owning a home.

The ability to limit the opportunity for such practices, which are often targeted at elderly people or other vulnerable individuals, must be a key aspect of any mortgage-rescue scheme. The Committee for Social Development made a number of recommendations to the Department on its proposed mortgage-rescue scheme. First, and most importantly, the Committee recommended that, under the scheme, homeowners must be able to remain in their homes; that is critical. Secondly — and to avoid the problems that were just mentioned — long-term rental agreements must be entered into with housing associations that can buy up equity. Thirdly, homeowners should, under the scheme, have the flexibility to be able to sell a portion of their equity at market prices and use that cash to clear outstanding debts.

Furthermore, homeowners should be able to staircase up and down as their circumstances change. That means that they should be allowed to sell or buy back portions of their equity in their own home. That should include the option to buy out the housing association's share of the equity entirely when the homeowner's financial situation improves.

Finally, prevention is better than cure. With that in mind, the Committee recommended that debt counselling and advice should be made available to all homeowners

and that those who are in immediate danger of repossession should be fast-tracked to that aspect of the mortgage-rescue scheme.

The Committee recognises the importance of a mortgage-rescue scheme and the difficulty in securing the necessary financial support for it. The Committee hopes that the Minister will work with her Executive colleagues to secure the necessary funding and bring the mortgage-rescue scheme into being as soon as possible.

**Mr Armstrong:** There is no question that the worldwide economic downturn has had a major impact in Northern Ireland. Like the raft of measures that have been suggested in response to that situation, a mortgage-rescue scheme is a good idea. Indeed, Northern Ireland is, at present, the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have such a scheme. However, without sufficient resources to enable it to be acted upon, the idea of a mortgage-rescue scheme is just empty words.

Excessive house prices, irresponsible lending and rising job losses as a result of the worldwide economic downturn have, therefore, combined to create a perfect storm in the local housing market. If we are serious about addressing this issue, we must provide the resources adequately to fund a mortgage-rescue scheme. Whether we adopt the idea of the homeowner selling the house and then renting it back, or selling a proportion to cover the debt in a reverse of the co-ownership scheme, the Minister requires money. If the recession continues, it is logical to assume that increasing amounts of money will be required and more people will find it more difficult to meet their mortgage payments.

I know that the Minister has made bids for funding in several monitoring rounds. According to the Department for Finance and Personnel (DFP) figures, a bid of £1 million was made in December 2008 in respect of a mortgage relief scheme. Yet, curiously, on 17 February 2009, a DSD spokesman told the 'Antrim Times' that the Minister's bids for funding that were made in the June, September and December 2008 monitoring rounds were not met.

I believe that much more funding will be required, and at a time when all departmental budgets are coming under extreme pressure. I ask those Members who expressed support for a mortgage-rescue scheme to press their party colleagues to put their hands up for it when the issue is discussed by the Executive.

Having made the plea for sufficient funds to be made available, I would emphasise that it is imperative that those who find themselves in difficulties should come forward at the earliest opportunity in order to seek help, advice and support.

This problem came on us very quickly as a result of a slump in the world economy and the global financial

system, and it is likely to be around for some time if the current economic forecast is anything to go by. It is also a problem that affects an ever-growing number of people in Northern Ireland.

In real terms, we are not talking about huge sums of money. However, when it comes to families struggling to make ends meet in difficult times, its value is immeasurable.

*12.00 noon*

A mortgage-rescue scheme would keep people out of destitution, it would free disposable income, it would create liquidity in the economy, and it would do something useful. I urge the Minister for Social Development to adopt a UK-wide approach to debt relief, and I also commend the motion to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

**Mr Burns:** I support the motion. Everyone knows that we live in difficult times. People are looking to the Assembly for leadership and help during this economic crisis. We are all concerned about the ever-rising numbers of repossessions, and that is certainly an area in which the Assembly can make a real difference. We can prove to the people that we listen to their worries and that we will help them when they are in need.

The Committee for Social Development has considered the mortgage-rescue scheme on a number of occasions, and I very much support the plan. However, the scheme can be open only to people who have fallen on hard times. It will not be a plan to bail out people who have lived beyond their means, who have bought second homes or holiday homes, or who have got into a lot of debt on the back of their mortgages. The rescue plan should be seen only as an absolute last resort. If families fall on bad luck because the breadwinners have lost their jobs, and if they are unable to come to an agreement with mortgage lenders and have no other options, we should step in and help.

The scheme that the Committee has considered is a worthwhile cause. Homeowners will be allowed to remain in their homes under a long-term rental agreement, and it will enable families to stay together and to remain in their communities. It is vital that children are able to stay at the same school, and that families do not have to move out of the areas in which they live.

Many people have worked hard to buy their houses, and hard-working families deserve help if they fall on difficult times. If people are badly in debt, they should be able to sell a portion of the equity on their house for the full market price and use that money to clear their debts. They should also be able to keep their homes under co-ownership agreements. Those people should also be allowed to keep a bit of money in the bank and to get benefits until they are back on their feet.

I want to see the most desperate cases — people whose houses are in immediate danger of repossession — being fast-tracked through the system. We want to help people to avoid long, expensive and stressful court cases.

I am disturbed by the behaviour of companies that take advantage of the rising number of people in mortgage arrears. They buy houses at below-market value from desperate people and then kick them out of their homes at the first opportunity. Those companies target the elderly and the vulnerable, which is totally unacceptable. We must do everything that we can to stop them. A mortgage-rescue scheme would seriously damage the ability of such companies to operate. It would also protect the people whom they exploit.

We have asked who will pay for this scheme and how much it will cost. Many figures — anything up to £5 million — have been suggested. I call on the Executive to find the money to give to the Minister for Social Development. I am sure that the Minister, in responding to this debate, will explain how important it is to have the money to make the scheme work. She has already bid for money three times but has been turned down. The scheme is worthwhile, and we should proceed with it as soon as possible. Therefore, I support the motion.

**Ms Lo:** I support the motion. As well as the increase in home repossessions, I am very concerned about reports of an increase in unregulated private companies that offer mortgage-rescue packages through sale-and-rent-back schemes. Such schemes exploit those who are in the vulnerable position of facing imminent repossession.

The consultation on the Department's proposed and very worthwhile mortgage-rescue scheme concluded in November 2008. The scheme was clearly welcomed by the voluntary sector and the public. There is a clear need and demand for the scheme to tackle the effects of our current economic downturn. The proposed scheme has a two-pronged approach: it offers advice and, as a last resort, practical assistance to enable people to remain in their homes, under either the flexible-tenure strand or the mortgage-to-rent strand. The scheme would help people to keep homes that they have worked very hard to buy and would allow them to stay in the localities in which they might have lived their whole lives.

However, funding is a big issue. In a recent letter to the Committee for Social Development, the Department stated that it is only seeking funding for the advice part of the scheme. DSD faces a deficit of £100 million a year for the next two years, so I can see the difficulty in pursuing the scheme in its full form. The Executive need to consider whether a mortgage-rescue scheme is a priority for Government. If so, they must come up with the cash necessary for DSD to implement the full scheme.

In Scotland in 2006-07, 173 households benefited from the Scottish mortgage-rescue scheme. That scheme cost £9 million and allocated an average subsidy of £50,000 to each of those households. By 2007-08, the budget for the scheme was £9.5 million, which helped just under 160 households and allocated an average subsidy of £60,000. In June 2008, the National Assembly for Wales announced that it was providing an extra £5 million for its mortgage-rescue scheme.

We need to be clear about how much money is, or will be, available for a mortgage-rescue scheme so that we do not raise false hope and expectation among people who already feel desperate and helpless and who look to DSD for help. If we do not have enough money, we need to be very clear and admit it. If we have enough money to provide the advice part of the scheme, at least that will be of some help to the community, but it is important that adequate money is provided to train and resource the advice sector.

In its response to the consultation, Citizens Advice was very concerned about the role of advice agencies, because they are not regulated to give mortgage advice, and they lack the resources necessary to support their increased workload.

I support the scheme and call on the Executive to back DSD so that the scheme will be ready, as soon as possible, to help all families who are in need.

**Mr Craig:** I support and welcome the motion. Unfortunately, it addresses the same matter that I raised in a private Members' motion last June on a not-for-profit mortgage-rescue scheme. At that time, there was, more or less, universal support for the implementation of a mortgage-rescue scheme. In fairness to the Minister, she supported the idea of such a scheme and came up with her own proposals. Unfortunately, we have seen no implementation of such a scheme since then.

The need for the scheme is probably much greater today than it was at that time. In the fourth quarter of 2008, some 939 writs and summonses were issued for the non-payment of mortgages, compared with 542 during the same period in 2007 — that is a rise of 73%. How many families and young couples most go through the stress, anguish, and even the embarrassment, of repossession before the Department acts?

It has often been said in the Chamber that the job of the Assembly is to make a difference to people's lives. It is the Assembly's job to do all that it can to help people during a time of economic turbulence. I agree with Thomas Burns that the Assembly must be innovative in its approach to helping people. The Assembly is in a position to help people by introducing a mortgage-rescue scheme, but its approach and the scheme require innovation.

Must the public purse and the Department fund 100% of the scheme? The clear answer is no. Many of the 26 housing associations in Northern Ireland have considerable amounts of cash to hand and, therefore, have the ability to finance many schemes. I do not say that as someone looking from the outside in; I have spoken to the housing associations, and they are willing to work with the Minister on how to finance the scheme.

That issue was brought to my attention by several constituents who, because of illness, found it difficult to pay the mortgage on their properties. After negotiations, housing associations purchased those homes from the individuals. Unfortunately, under the current legislation in the common selection scheme, housing associations immediately had to evict those individuals, because they had to be reassessed according to the points system in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McCarthy:** Does the Member agree that people who lose their homes are simply added to the housing list, which, as Members know, is already massive, and that there is insufficient funding to provide additional social housing to meet that increased need?

**Mr Craig:** I fully concur with the Member, and I was about to make a point about the additional cost to the taxpayers. They pay for everything, not only the cost of evicting people from areas in which they and their children had settled. As all Members know, there is not enough housing to meet the demand. Therefore, those individuals who were evicted ended up living in privately rented accommodation, the cost of which was subsidised by taxpayers.

Worse still, in one case, a house had been specifically adapted to meet the needs of some of its occupants. When, following their eviction, the Housing Executive and a different housing association had to provide them with a new house, the taxpayer had to spend further money to adapt it to meet their needs. The taxpayer lost out not once, but twice.

Why can the Assembly not intervene? Why can the Assembly not launch a mortgage-rescue scheme that at least uses the financial capacity of many housing associations to help those individuals? Taxpayers need not necessarily provide 100% of the money for the scheme. The Assembly must think outside the box and talk to the housing associations.

I plead with the Minister to talk to the housing associations to explore the options for helping those individuals. There may, or may not, be any point in asking the Minister of Finance and Personnel for additional funding; given the circumstances, he may provide some money. However, it is unacceptable to blame him continually for everything and to expect there to be a bottomless pit of available money.

There is no bottomless pit. In Northern Ireland, we are stuck with an even worse situation. There will, no

doubt, be more increases in demand from the security forces over the next few months, which will put even greater strain on the public purse.

12.15 pm

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr Craig:** I urge the Minister to rethink the policy, to talk to others and to bring forward a scheme.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The stark reality is that people are losing their houses and homes due to repossession. That is borne out by statistics issued by the Court Service on the number of repossessions. As has been stated, the number of actions for mortgage repossession from April to June 2008 was 929 — an increase of 345 compared with the same period in the previous year. As time has gone on, the situation facing homeowners has reached crisis level.

In February 2008, the Minister announced her intention to introduce a mortgage-rescue scheme, and said that it should be in place by July 2008. Of course, to date, nothing has been forthcoming: plenty of rhetoric, certainly, but no rescue scheme.

The proposed mortgage-rescue scheme will be administrative and discretionary and not statutory. Presumably, therefore, the people who qualify will do so based on a subjective rather than on an objective opinion of the administrator of the scheme. The provision of independent advice will be key in deciding who may qualify for the scheme, because people will have to show that they have sought and followed independent advice. Therefore, advice agencies will play a vital role in outlining the options available to those facing the mortgage crisis. People will be given advice as the last course of action open to them in their particular circumstances.

I agree with what Jonathan Craig said in relation to the mortgage-rescue scheme as proposed, because people will have to move out of their houses, and the common selection scheme will then be used. Surely, that contradicts the purpose of the scheme whereby people need to be helped to stay in their own homes? As has been pointed out, many homes are adapted for particular needs, and it is a burden on the taxpayer to add people to the waiting list, while people who may not qualify for adapted homes are moved into them. If the common selection scheme is a problem, as my colleague Fra McCann has stated, then it needs to be reviewed. That has been talked about for many years, and to date, again, nothing has been done to deal with that problem.

Any mortgage-rescue plan has to be welcomed. However, there needs to be a co-ordinated effort by all Departments to cope adequately with the problem. DSD needs to do more to provide adequate social housing

and not continue to blame others. Many people have been forced to purchase properties because of the lack of adequate social housing, and are then unable to maintain mortgage repayments through no fault of their own. That has to be recognised, and if adequate advice is to be a main plank of the proposed system, special advice agencies need to be given the proper funding and resources to maximise their input.

We have listened to the talk and promises from DSD; now is the time for action to stop this continuing blight on our society. The Minister has to take decisive action, and take it now. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Beggs:** I, too, support the motion. We must consider the bleak financial outlook that many families in Northern Ireland generally face, which will put additional pressure on the Minister and on the Department for Social Development in their attempt to meet their needs.

Northern Ireland is witnessing increasing levels of unemployment, with some 36,000 people at the last count signing on to the jobseeker's allowance scheme. Many of those people are unemployed for the first time, and the recession is hitting white- and blue-collar workers hard. It is having a major impact on their lives. It is affecting people generally, and working families particularly, and their ability to continue to pay their mortgages.

We have also had to come to terms with the realisation that over the past five years, the Northern Ireland housing market, like so many markets, entered a parallel universe in which house prices were beyond what many incomes could sustain. Mortgages were all too readily made available by the banks, which have placed so many people in a vulnerable situation.

In the first quarter of this year, the number of repossessions has risen significantly, with 929 applications for repossession being made to the courts. Given the economic downturn, in coming months, that situation is likely to worsen.

Many households and, indeed, families with children throughout Northern Ireland, are facing an uncertain future. Therefore, it was with great encouragement that I and others welcomed the Minister for Social Development's announcement in February 2008, when she said that she would seek to introduce a mortgage-rescue scheme as part of a new housing agenda. In June 2008, the Minister welcomed an Assembly motion calling on her to introduce a mortgage-rescue scheme. The Minister claimed that she had the basis of a scheme, that it would be unique to Northern Ireland, and that it would be tailored to meet our specific needs.

What has happened since then? In fact, the Minister for Social Development's original budget did not earmark money for such a scheme, and since then, the

Department for Social Development's financial position has deteriorated significantly due to the drop in the value of assets that it had hoped to sell. I recognise that at each monitoring round since June 2008, the Minister has made unsuccessful — to date — bids for an additional £5 million to fund such a scheme.

I believe that the Minister is aware of how drastic the situation is becoming for many individuals and families, and like other Members, I am aware from constituency cases of how many vulnerable families, including those with disabled members, are threatened with homelessness and have been drawn into using moneylenders and buy-to-let schemes. Subsequently, many of those people have discovered that their tenure is insecure, so I ask anyone who is considering using such a scheme to examine it carefully and to get good advice before signing any new contract. I support the idea that housing associations might have a constructive role to play in the matter, although that role, in itself, could create difficulties. Buy-to-let schemes may have a place, but householders with secure tenures must be careful in case they end up becoming homeless.

For some time, the Ulster Unionist Party has been warning people that we are in a difficult financial situation. We are now discovering that a range of services are under threat. For example, the extended schools scheme is being underfunded and the Department for Social Development is unable to implement the social and affordable housing agenda. Significant financial failures have caused additional pressures, including the failure of the Workplace 2010 proposal, Land and Property Service's rates collection fiasco, and the failure by the Department of Finance and Personnel to accurately value the Crossnacreevy proposal. Consequently, the amount of available funds has deteriorated, so —

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

**Mr Beggs:** Therefore, there is an urgent need to make moneys available to enable that to happen and to ensure that we protect the most vulnerable people in our society.

**Mr A Maginness:** There is general agreement in the House about the need for a mortgage-rescue scheme. Indeed, the Committee for Social Development was presented with an outline of the scheme envisaged by the Minister. Furthermore, Members had an opportunity to contribute to the scheme's consultation process in the autumn. Given the grave financial situation in which many families find themselves, whether they are living in homes from housing associations, the Housing Executive or the private sector, a mortgage-rescue scheme is necessary.

The objective of a scheme of this sort is to assist people financially, and that requires money. It is

necessary that that money be advanced to the Department for Social Development so that such a scheme can be fully and effectively implemented.

Colleagues in the Chamber have said that the money should be found in the budget of the Department for Social Development. I ask them, given the financial straits that the Department is in, where will the money be found? If colleagues wish the Department's budget to be reprioritised, are they suggesting that the Supporting People programme be cut, for instance? Will the housing maintenance programme be cut further? Will the house-building programme be cut? Will the warm homes scheme be cut back? Please tell me which programmes should be cut. Furthermore, how will a scheme be implemented if new money is not made available?

Mr Craig said that we cannot go to the Department of Finance and Personnel to ask for money. Why not? The Department for Social Development has not got the money, and this is an urgent priority — as evidenced by the remarks that have been made around the Chamber. Where do we get the money? That is the question that I put to the House. Members should be putting pressure on the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Department to advance more money to deal with this urgent problem.

If the money is not forthcoming, the central and substantive feature of the scheme cannot be put into effect and we will not be able to help people. We can help people by providing advice and by trying to postpone the evil day, but we cannot rescue them. The central element of the plan is to rescue homes and to do away with the devastating consequences about which many Members have talked today.

If we cannot reprioritise the DSD budget — and I am convinced that we cannot do that without affecting other vital schemes — how do we bring about a mortgage-rescue programme that will rescue people? There has been no answer to that question. Mr Craig is going to give me an answer now.

**Mr Craig:** I made a suggestion to the Minister, and I hope that the Minister takes it up. Housing associations are cash rich, because, over the past number of years, they have not been able to purchase land on which to build new social housing. We could tap into that source to fund a scheme that would rescue people from their mortgages. We do not need the old thinking; we need to start thinking outside the box. The taxpayer cannot bail everything out all of the time. It is time that we started to think about alternatives.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr A Maginness:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank Mr Craig for a useful and interesting suggestion. However, it is a wee bit like a remark that was made in

the House of Lords by the former Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, when he said that the privatisation of public assets was like selling the family silver. The problem is that although housing associations have assets and cash, they have to be careful because their main concern is to invest in new homes. If we deprive them of that, we are depriving them of the ability to maximise the use of that money to create new homes.

**Mr McCarthy:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr A Maginness:** No; I will not give way.

I welcome the reduction in the waiting time for support for mortgage interest, from 39 weeks to 13 weeks from 5 January this year. I look forward to the introduction of the homeowner mortgage-support scheme, which will allow households to defer part of their mortgage payment for up to two years — that is a very welcome initiative.

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next Member to speak will be Jim Shannon.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

**Mr Shannon:** I am glad to be able to speak on this issue, as it is a matter that is close to my heart and close to the heart of the Minister. It is a worrying time for homeowners across the Province, and I have been vocal, both inside and outside the Chamber, on the issue of affordable housing. I have listened to stories of some young people who were taking on mortgages of £1,000 a month for homes that had doubled in value, and now, with job losses and cutbacks, those young people — and older folks, too — are in real danger of losing their homes.

The situation is not limited to the Province; the mainland is being hit hard as well. However, the response over there has been a lot more prompt. My information comes from Internet research. The English programme was devised last year by the National Housing Federation, which represents England's housing associations, and the Council of Mortgage Lenders. Not-for-profit housing associations will buy homes from people who are struggling to pay their mortgages and allow them to continue living there. The Government have said that the £200 million scheme could help up to 6,000 households that might otherwise face repossession.

Scotland has had a similar scheme since 2003, and more than 700 households have benefited from it. The Scottish Government have said that they plan to extend the existing mortgage-to-rent scheme as well as to develop a new mortgage-to-equity programme, which, I believe, will help some owners to keep full possession of their homes, while substantially reducing their debt.

Wales also has a mortgage-rescue scheme, which involves housing associations registered with the National Assembly for Wales.

Northern Ireland's Department for Social Development has issued a consultation document on setting up such a scheme but has still to launch it formally — and that is one of my concerns. Perhaps, to be fair, that is where the problem lies. We have done nothing other than prepare the consultation document, but the time for consultation is well past for many people. Nevertheless, if a scheme were to be brought in now, it would be just in time to help other people.

In mi' ain area a' ken fowk whau hae wrocht herd fer tae bi' a bigger haem, en er noo faced wi' tha proaspect o' sellin weel alooe tha velye fer feer that they irny abel tae pay aff ther mortgage. Fowk whau er tradesmen but hae haud nae bisness o' laet. Then there r yins whau's pntners hae loast ther joabs. This soart o' thing is iver aw en is repeated iver an iver en needs oor Social an Developmunt Meenester tae step in an dae sumthin. This iw whut we er axkin fer tha day.

I know of people in my constituency who have worked hard to buy bigger homes, and who are now faced with the prospect of selling those homes well below their value, for fear that they may not be able to repay their mortgages. Those people are tradesmen, but they have had no business of late and, in some circumstances, their partners have lost their jobs. That situation is repeated far too often for the Minister for Social Development not to step in and do something. That is what we are asking for today.

Under the English scheme, the housing associations will buy homes at an independently assessed market price. Successful applicants will remain in their properties, either as tenants on affordable rent, or as owners, after receiving a loan from a housing association. It is intended that once the householder's financial situation has improved, he or she can pay back the loan in part or in full. The scheme is targeted at families with small children, households with a disabled member, pensioners or those deemed to be vulnerable in any other way.

People who seek help will apply to their local authority and will have their finances assessed by a designated agency. The property will then be valued, and the housing association will step in to buy it. The scheme is changing the lives of families on the mainland. Are young families and elderly people in our Province any less deserving?

The Government on the mainland have expanded the income support for mortgage interest (ISMI) scheme, which means that the time before homeowners who lose their jobs receive financial help with the interest payments on their mortgage has been cut from 39 weeks to 13 weeks. Under another initiative — the homeowner mortgage support scheme — householders who see their incomes fall unexpectedly will be allowed to defer part of their payments for up to two years. Under the mortgage pre-action protocol, lenders will be legally compelled to use repossession only as a last resort, after looking at other alternatives with the borrower, such as reducing monthly payments.

What has the Minister put in place in Northern Ireland? The answer is, unfortunately, not enough. The time for consulting is over; it is now time for action. I ask the Minister to deal with the situation as a matter of priority, before more families lose their homes and their livelihoods.

The number of warnings of mortgage arrears between July and September almost doubled since the same period the previous year — 1,006 writs and summonses in 2008, compared with 521 in 2007. In Northern Ireland in 2008, 3,628 mortgage arrears warnings were issued — a year-on-year rise of 64%.

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

**Mr Shannon:** There has also been an increase in the number of people seeking debt advice. I urge the Minister for Social Development to respond positively, which I hope she will. Members will hear later in the debate whether she will meet the mortgage needs of people in the Province.

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I welcome this timely opportunity to look again at a Northern Ireland-specific mortgage-rescue scheme and thank Members who have contributed to the debate. If my response fails to address any of the points that they raised, I will write to them separately.

The motion calls for me:

“to bring forward a mortgage-rescue plan as soon as possible.”

I am happy to say that, subject to resources, I am ready to do so.

When I launched the new housing agenda last year, I made it clear that I wanted not only to help people onto the housing ladder but to support those who are striving to stay on it. I said that I wanted to establish a mortgage-rescue scheme and that I would bring forward detailed proposals later in 2008.

Members will recall a very positive debate in June 2008 on the need for such a scheme. In that debate, I said that I intended to publish detailed proposals and to put them out to consultation. I have done that. The consultation comments were received in November, and most supported my concept of a scheme that would offer enhanced advice and two main financial interventions.

The responses to the consultation have been analysed and a policy paper has been drawn up. We are in a position to move very quickly to introduce a robust mortgage-rescue scheme; therefore Members will recognise that we have done the work that we said we would. Members will also recall that in that June debate I said that those plans would require funding. That remains the position.

I have bid for funding for mortgage rescue in three successive monitoring rounds. Regrettably, those bids have not been met. However, there is no doubt that a mortgage-rescue scheme is needed now more than ever. During the fourth quarter of 2008 alone, 939 applications for repossession orders were made to the courts here — a 73% increase over the same period in the previous year. The total for the year, of 3,628 repossession applications, is a rise of 64% on 2007. That trend deeply concerns me, as it does Members here.

We may want to find someone to blame for all this, and we may ask questions about irresponsible lending or about financial institutions moving to foreclose too quickly. However, blaming the banks or others — as some in the House prefer — rather than looking for solutions does little to help people who are struggling

to hang on to their homes. The truth is that the economic downturn is landing many thousands of households and businesses in dire financial circumstances.

Members know that initiatives have already been implemented or are being considered, including reducing the waiting time for mortgage-interest support from 39 weeks to 13 weeks from 5 January 2009. Over the next few months, the Department for Communities and Local Government will announce details of the homeowner mortgage-support scheme, which will allow part of householders' mortgage interest payments to be deferred for up to two years. Allied to that, the Court Service is considering introducing a protocol that will require lenders not to seek a possession order for at least three months and to demonstrate to the courts that all reasonable avenues have been explored before seeking such an order.

With DSD support, the local Court Service and the Housing Rights Service have set up advice facilities at the Royal Courts of Justice and at the Laganside Courts for people taken to court without their own legal representation.

The mortgage-rescue scheme that I have developed can provide help through both preventative measures, that is, advice, and through direct intervention, that is, becoming a tenant of, or a joint homeowner with, a housing association.

The first element relates to assistance that is offered by an advice service. That part of the scheme is open to every member of the general public, including people who have mortgage arrears, as well as those who fear that they may not be able to meet mortgage payments in the near future. The second element relates to the part of the scheme that provides direct intervention through a scheme administrator, supported by participating housing associations. That element of the scheme is designed to help a small number of people who find it impossible to meet mortgage payments and who meet a number of other criteria.

I emphasise that the scheme is administrative and discretionary, rather than statutory. As well as meeting the eligibility criteria, applications must be prioritised to ensure that the most vulnerable could be helped within the limited resources that are available. As in other jurisdictions, the scheme will help only some of those who find themselves in financial difficulty. In England, the funding that was announced for mortgage rescue will help only 6,000 people out of potentially millions who are in financial difficulty. However, a relatively small amount of funding can go a very long way towards lifting the despair that many people will face in the coming months.

Let us be realistic about the money: the overall housing budget is facing a shortfall of £100 million in each of the next two years, and that is just to do things

that were planned at the start of the budget cycle. It does not include new schemes that we would like to establish, such as mortgage rescue.

People really need to get their heads around the fact that £100 million is not just a number: it is more than one third of the housing budget, and it will mean substantially less spending on housing — whether that be on newbuild, improvements or maintenance. Unless the Executive revisit the budget allocation for housing, the bitter reality of the shortfall will hit home very soon. A full-blooded mortgage-rescue scheme cannot go ahead without proper funding. After three bids, the outlook for that is poor. Until I secure the necessary funding, I will not raise expectations.

I will now address comments from Members. David Hilditch and others mentioned debt advice. I regard that as a priority. In relation to helping people, that is an efficient investment of money. Jim Shannon referred to the scheme that was launched in January 2009. It is important to remember that England, Wales and Scotland have the money to operate the scheme. Unfortunately, we do not.

Anna Lo and Billy Armstrong both referred to the need for the Executive to find more resources. I could not agree more. Roy Beggs helpfully acknowledged the financial crisis that faces housing, as did Alban Maginness and Thomas Burns. That is the reality. Jonathan Craig made the point that housing associations have cash resources that could be used to finance the mortgage-rescue scheme. To some extent, however, that would be like robbing Peter to pay Paul. We are pressing housing associations to pay an ever-increasing share of our newbuild costs so that our money — taxpayers' money — goes further. If we strip away housing-association reserves, we limit the contribution that they can make to much-needed newbuild.

I am grateful to Mr Craig because, unlike some others, he made a constructive suggestion.

**Mr McCarthy:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have little time, so I will continue. I hope that the Member accepts my apology.

Yesterday, we saw what many commentators thought was a new maturity in our politics, given the recent atrocities. Today, however, it is back to business as usual for Mr Fra McCann and Mr Brady — scraping the barrel to score cheap political points.

Mr McCann, who has had personal coaching on housing finance matters, knows full well that there is a huge shortfall in the housing budget. I made it clear in the Chamber long before now that new money would be required to finance the mortgage-rescue scheme, yet the Member is happy to pretend not only that DSD should already have the money, but that mortgage

rescue would be a magic solution for everyone in financial difficulty. If Mr McCann did even the most basic arithmetic, he would know that to buy out everyone facing repossession in this year alone would cost something like £300 million.

2.15 pm

Mickey Brady also tried to pretend that the money exists, if only the Minister would allocate it. Those men shed crocodile tears for the many people who are facing repossession and hardship, yet all they are doing is exploiting fears and raising expectations so that they can score a few cheap points. That is despicable.

If proof of Sinn Féin's spin is needed, let me refer Members to that party's response to my autumn consultation on the mortgage-rescue scheme. This is what Sinn Féin said:

"Sinn Féin believes that resources should be made available by the Executive to allow for a mortgage relief scheme to be put in place as soon as practicable."

There it is in black and white.

However, I have a bit of good news. Although we cannot afford direct financial interventions, we can step up the provision of much-needed financial and legal advice. I am pleased to announce that, within the next few weeks, we will invest in excess of £100,000, in addition to the amount that we are already spending, to increase the volume of professional mortgage-rescue advice and legal support available to those facing repossession. We will also assist in the training of more specialist advisers. Together, those measures will still help a lot of people.

I welcome today's motion, and I know that there is support for the work that I have already undertaken and for what I have just announced. In addition, if we can secure the requisite funding for a full-blown mortgage-rescue scheme, then the House can rest assured that we have done the work and are ready to go.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members who spoke in the debate, which has been worthwhile. It is the second time that the Assembly has debated this subject: last year, it debated a motion calling for the establishment of a not-for-profit mortgage-rescue scheme.

When he moved the motion, Fra McCann outlined the human impact of unemployment and redundancy, and many Members spoke about the difficulties that their constituents face and of the many families who are being put through the mill. They are under great emotional, personal and financial pressure. They are trying to hold on to their homes, and, in some cases, sadly, their families.

In February 2008, the Minister announced that she would set up a mortgage-relief scheme, but, as Fra McCann pointed out, it is now March 2009, and there

is no scheme. The economic situation that has arisen has taken us all by surprise. Figures were quoted today. The number of applications to the court has increased by 73%, and that figure was not lost on anyone. Fra McCann, Micky Brady, David Hilditch, Billy Armstrong and others mentioned the importance of getting proper advice, particularly from the independent advice sector. The Minister's announcement on the advice facilities set up by the Court Service and the Housing Rights Service is to be welcomed — anything that will alleviate the pressure and burden on families must be welcomed.

David Hilditch, who is the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, outlined in some detail the Committee's views. Regular discussions have taken place on the issue. It is not a conspiracy — the political parties are not huddling in Room 144 or Room 135 to get at the Minister. The issue comes up regularly, and, as elected representatives, we are confronted by it almost daily, as we try to help the people who put us here. Therefore, I know that some paranoia exists at times, but let us put that one to rest.

Issues that were raised included families remaining in their homes, housing associations and rents, having cash to clear debts, and equity. However, above all, people go through a process and are then evicted. Fra McCann, Mickey Brady, Thomas Burns, David Hilditch and Jonathan Craig all raised that point. People must go through a process whereby they are declared homeless before they go back on a waiting list on the basis of the common selection scheme, and that almost defeats the purpose.

As elected representatives, we are continually faced with trying to find out how the mortgage-rescue plan gets resourced under the Minister's responsibility. That is one of our main concerns. Alban Maginness, if Members even need reminding, was like the Rod Tidwell character in 'Jerry Maguire', who said, "Show me the money!" He said that there is a need for agreement and for a mortgage-rescue scheme. He spoke about the necessity of the scheme, which, in fairness, all Members welcome. However, interestingly, he spoke about financially assisting people, and it brought me back to the debates that we had on the Financial Assistance Bill, which is now in law. Not for one minute do I interpret that Act as being somewhere where things that other Departments cannot afford are dumped. However, since we debated that legislation, there has been a marked increase in the number of people losing their homes.

Rather than try to respond to the comments that have been made in today's debate, and in previous debates, the Minister should genuinely take on board the comments made and consider what can be done. Regardless of what the Minister said today about my party colleagues, people are very concerned about

what can be done to alleviate the situation for people who are going through the mill.

Housing is DSD's responsibility, but we realise that there are resource problems. If the Minister went to her colleagues in the Executive with copies of Hansard and told them that the issue frequently arises, and if she made a robust attempt to have the scheme funded, I dare say that that would have more of an impact than her sitting here churlishly making personal insults to Members who have the audacity to care about their constituents does.

We then got a lecture on political craft from her colleague Alex Attwood. When the Minister attended the Ulster Unionist Party conference — I think that that is what the party was called then — she did not ask about mortgage-rescue schemes, nor did she ask about resources. Instead, she said, "No surrender." Furthermore, when her party leader went to Oxford and spoke about stripping down the whole issue of partnership, he did not argue for more resources for here.

The Minister needs to take on board what people are saying. I ask her to consider the comments that have been made today. I am delighted that Members who spoke did so with compassion and genuine concern about what is happening. If the Minister makes a real attempt to go to her Executive colleagues and argue for more money, the Assembly will support that. However, we firmly believe that the first port of call is DSD.

Today's announcement that an advice centre is to offer assistance is very welcome. The Minister has done well, but she needs to do more. I ask the House to support motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly expresses concern at the increasing levels of house repossessions and calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a mortgage-rescue plan as soon as possible.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Dual Mandates

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time where two or more amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

I inform Members that a valid petition of concern in relation to this motion was presented on Monday 9 March. I remind Members that the effect of that petition is that the vote on the motion will be decided on a cross-community basis. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Beggs:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I suspect that some of the 30 Members whose names are on the petition of concern have a conflict of interest. Will the Speaker advise as to whether that conflict of interest has any bearing on this attempt to suppress the will of the Assembly? Will he also advise whether the list will be published, and will he tell us where it can be examined?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Speaker has decided that the petition of concern is valid, and it can be viewed in the Business Office.

**Mr Elliott:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to request the UK Government to bring forward legislation to prohibit dual mandates of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the UK Parliament.

At the outset, I extend my personal sympathy both to the family of the police officer who was tragically murdered last night and to the families of the soldiers who were murdered on Saturday night. I also wish a speedy recovery to those who were injured. It is only right that I do so at this time.

It is unfortunate that there is a need to debate the motion, and it is an even greater shame that one of the two amendments that we will debate attempts to confuse and water down the issue and kick it into touch. Some people will say that there is no focus on councillors, and, indeed, our motion is clearly focused on the dual mandate of Members of the Assembly and Members of the House of Commons in Westminster. However, we hoped that the issue of councillors would be resolved by new legislation under the review of

public administration (RPA) and that, therefore, there would be no need to confuse the matter.

As the world looks on, we are debating a situation that is almost more appropriate to a banana republic than to a regional Assembly of the United Kingdom. It is unfortunate that a petition of concern has been presented. I wonder whether some Members lodged that petition of concern in respect of their own jobs. Is it a petition of concern for their own jobs? "Working the double" is a term that is often used in this society to describe the offences of benefit cheats. However, that term also seems to apply to the 16 Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly who are MPs, including seven Ministers and one junior Minister. It is worth noting that Sinn Féin and the DUP are the most conspicuous parties in that matter. Nine of the 17 double-jobbers throughout the United Kingdom are from the DUP, and five are from Sinn Féin.

In stark contrast, no Members of the Welsh Assembly are MPs, and only one Member of the Scottish Parliament — the First Minister — is an MP. It is already a robust and well-established constitutional convention in both Scotland and Wales that a Member of the regional Parliament or Assembly should not also be a part of the national Parliament. It is also expressly forbidden for an MEP to be a Member of the national Parliament.

It is difficult for ordinary voters in this society and community, many of whom are losing their jobs or whose jobs are under threat, to accept the number of MLAs who are working the double as MPs.

2.30 pm

The situation is indefensible. It reeks of personal empire building, and no reasonable man or woman can accept this situation or accept that it should be allowed to continue for one more day — let alone leaving it, as the DUP amendment says, for further consideration and subjecting it to "a phased approach". It is a matter that must be judged on principle: it is either right or wrong, and, if wrong, it must be ended forthwith and not subjected to a phased approach. This is just the same as last week's vote on the provisions of the Health Bill [HL] dealing with tobacco. The amendment is self-serving. If working the double is wrong tomorrow and will ultimately be phased out, it is wrong today and should be done away with immediately.

I know that there is a temptation for parties to run high-profile candidates, and that is why this matter should not be left to those parties alone. Rather, it should be enshrined in legislation, so that the parties and individuals concerned cannot yield to the temptation. It is insulting to the electorate — and to the main institution of democratic representation and Government in this country, the Westminster Parliament — that being an MP should be considered a part-time add-on

job by the 16 Members of this Assembly who are also MPs. Of those 16 Members, eight are also Ministers.

Let us speak plainly about this. It may seem all right to those who benefit from this double-jobbing: they are often insulated from the realities of life in the real world. However, ordinary members of the public see that double-jobbing as personal enrichment at public expense.

I am informed that a Member of Parliament earns almost £62,000. For an Assembly Member who is also an MP, that figure rises to over £76,000. A Minister earns an additional £37,800; a junior Minister an additional £19,600; and the First and deputy First Ministers an additional £71,500. That has led to some individuals in this Assembly earning almost £150,000 per year. That is before one takes into account the keep-it-in-your-family effect which seems to be peculiar to one party. Is that the real nature of the family party? Some political households may be close to doubling the aforementioned amount — and that does not include payment of expenses and allowances available to both Members of the Assembly and Members of Parliament. There are times when the public must wonder whether those people might be better paid than some of the now-notorious former directors of the Royal Bank of Scotland.

Some of the DUP and Sinn Féin double-jobbers might say that their rates of pay as Assembly Members are cut because of the double-jobbing. The answer to that is clear: are there two classes of Assembly Members — those paid a full-time rate for a full-time job, and those paid a part-time rate for a part-time job? Then there is the question of which job is the part-time one. Is it that of being an Assembly Member, or that of being a Member of Parliament at Westminster? Are the constituents of Assembly Members who double-job as MPs receiving full-time representation in both legislatures?

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Elliott:** The Member has been looking to get in all the time, so I might as well.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will he clarify for me whether he is the same Thomas Elliott who ran in 2005 for both Westminster and his local council while being an MLA? Perhaps that was some other Thomas Elliott? I would be happy to receive information from the Member on that.

**Mr McNarry:** There is only one Thomas Elliott.

**Mr Elliott:** I wonder whether this is the same Peter Weir who also ran for Westminster while an MLA. I indicated clearly on that occasion that, if elected to Westminster, I would stand down as an MLA. I do not know whether Mr Weir gave a similar indication. If not, I leave him to answer for it.

Do those MPs who sit in the Assembly mean to tell us that they can be in two places at once? Can they be in this Chamber while they are in Westminster?

**Mr McClarty:** Does the Member agree with me that, although an Assembly Member who is also an MP has his Assembly salary abated, the office cost allowance remains? In that way, as an MP, he or she will get a full MPs' office cost allowance, and also, as an MLA, a full office cost allowance for the Assembly.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I understand that the person gets the full office cost allowance for being a Member of the Assembly and the full office cost allowance for being a Member of Parliament. Quite clearly, there is a huge difference between what someone can earn — or receive in expenses — as a Member of Parliament and an MLA, and someone doing solely one of those jobs.

The editor of a major local newspaper wrote recently:

"Observers at Westminster tell me the presence of some Northern Ireland MPs is increasingly fleeting. It is obvious that some of our representatives cannot do two jobs properly. They are making quick trips to London, popping in and out of the House of Commons, and turning what should be a vitally essential full-time occupation into a part-time charade."

I believe that the initiative for change should come from the Assembly. The legislation has to be initiated by Westminster, and that is the purpose of the motion. If that happens, it will look as if the national Parliament can intervene and do something about it. I think that the initiative should come from the Assembly and that the people who are doing the double-jobbing should stand up and say that it is right to call for legislation and to do it now.

**Miss McIlveen:** I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes that the issue of multiple mandates, including council membership, is to be further considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and believes that a phased approach to this matter represents the best way forward."

Before I begin, I would like to express my condolences to the families of those killed during the past few days and to wish those injured in those murderous attacks a swift and full recovery. Events such as those bring into focus how petty motions such as this are, given the bloodshed that has once again blighted the streets of Northern Ireland.

In relation to the proposed amendment, I declare an interest as someone who holds a double mandate — I am a councillor in Ards Borough Council. I was elected in the 2005 local government elections, and in that council area the DUP polled 49.1% of the vote. In the 2007 Assembly elections, the DUP returned four MLAs in my constituency of Strangford, with 50.1% of first preference votes. In the last Westminster election, my party colleague Iris Robinson polled

56.5% of the vote, with a massive majority of more than 13,000 votes over her closest rival, who just happened to be an Ulster Unionist. The Assembly elections and the Westminster elections have something in common for all the DUP candidates; we all held other elected mandates. Despite that, however, the public overwhelmingly elected us into office.

When I first read the motion in the names of two Ulster Unionist Party Members, I thought: why would Members from that party choose to set down such a motion? Could it be that they would never hold a dual mandate? When I think about the membership of the Ulster Unionist Party Benches, I am struck by the Members who not only occupy those Benches, but the benches of local councils.

**Mr McClarty:** Will the Member give way?

**Miss McIlveen:** No, I have a lot to say.

I need look no further than the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Sir Reg Empey. He is a Belfast City councillor, an MLA, the Minister for Employment and Learning, and, of course, perpetual candidate for the East Belfast constituency. Is the motion an indication that the Ulster Unionist Party leader will not be contesting that constituency come the next general election? Is it an indication that we can expect to hear about his resignation from Belfast City Council?

Sir Reg is not the only Member sitting on the neighbouring Benches to hold a dual mandate. His ministerial colleague, Mr McGimpsey, keeps him company in Belfast City Council. They might have been joined in the Northern Ireland Assembly by other council colleagues, Jim Rodgers and Bob Stoker; however, the electorate decided against that.

I believe that dual-mandate holders in the Ulster Unionist Party — and I am willing to be corrected if I am wrong — include Mr Basil McCrea, Mr Kennedy, Mr McClarty, Mr Cobain, Mr Savage, Mr Ken Robinson, Mr Cree, Mr Beggs, Mr Gardiner and Mr Elliott. I look forward to seeing none of those names on the ballot paper at the next general election, particularly that of Mr Elliott, one of the proposers of the motion. I hope that he is now going to leave the job of regaining Fermanagh and South Tyrone for unionism to the person best placed to do so — Mrs Arlene Foster.

There are other local councillors in the Chamber, and I am sure that they will not mind me mentioning their names — Mr Farry, Mr McGlone, Mr Burns, Mr McCann, Mr Brian Wilson. In fact, every party, bar the single Member PUP, has local councillors who are also MLAs.

One noteworthy fact is that, of the 108 MLAs who were elected in 2003, 54 stood as candidates for Westminster. Therefore, the reason behind the motion

is not for the Ulster Unionist Party to show that it is a one-mandate-only party, and perhaps it is because it objects to MPs holding more than one elected mandate. In the dim and distant past — the bad old days, so to speak — the former Ulster Unionist Party leader, Mr Trimble, and the deputy leader, Mr Taylor, were MPs when they held seats in the Assembly, so it definitely cannot be that.

Then I considered that perhaps the Ulster Unionist Party was saying that those who held dual and multiple mandates could not carry out their duties properly. My attendance at my local council has been over 90% in the past year — not that I keep track of such matters. I am also advised that, from May 2007 to January 2009, my voting record in Divisions in the Assembly was 93.3%, and my attendance at Committee meetings was also noted as 100%.

The DUP's overall voting record in the Assembly sits at a healthy average of 84.2%, far outstripping any other party in the Assembly. Even the PUP, which has a single Member, has a paltry record of 29.2%. Mr Deeny's record is 23.6%, and Mr McHugh's record is 29.2%. Perhaps it could be said that it is more difficult for single-Member parties to cope with the additional work, but let us compare their records with DUP Ministers. Sammy Wilson MP has a voting record of 62.9%, Nigel Dodds MP has a voting record of 64%, Peter Robinson MP has a voting record of 70.8%, Jeffrey Donaldson MP has a voting record of 74.2%, and Arlene Foster has a voting record of 77.5%.

When that is compared with the Ulster Unionist Party's multiple-mandate Ministers, Sir Reg Empey could manage a voting record of only 37%, and Mr McGimpsey managed to cast his vote 47% of the time. The SDLP's Dr McDonnell, who holds a seat in Westminster and in the Assembly, has a 54% voting record in Divisions here and a 22.9% voting record in Westminster since the last election. His party leader, Mr Durkan, has a 58% voting record in Divisions in the Assembly and a 25.9% voting record in Westminster.

In Westminster, Sammy Wilson has a 47.5% voting record, William McCrea has a 47.6% voting record, my colleague Gregory Campbell has a record of 44.1%, Nigel Dodds has a record of 43.9%, and David Simpson's voting record is 41.1%. All those records are available online, with information on the number of debates in which Members participated and the questions that they asked. It is a very interesting read.

Sinn Féin, of course, does not represent its constituents in Westminster, so we cannot compare its multiple-mandate holders. The Ulster Unionists, of course, do not currently have anyone in the House of Commons against whom to compare multiple mandates, given that that party was left clinging to a single seat in the last general election.

That brings me to my next question: is the Ulster Unionist Party saying that a single-mandate Member could do the job better? I have already referred to the records of Ms Purvis and Dr Deeny, but perhaps I should look no further than at the Ulster Unionists' very own David Burnside, who has an astonishing 20% voting record in this Chamber. Mr Burnside did not have the distraction of Westminster any more, nor did he have to warm his seat in his local council, but he did not warm his seat too much in the Assembly either.

**Mr Elliott:** Will the Member give way?

**Miss McIlveen:** No, I have a lot to get through.

Perhaps the SDLP's single-mandate MP, Mr McGrady, could help out to show that his voting record far outstrips that of the DUP's MPs. No: his records show that he has voted in only 17.8% of Divisions in the House of Commons. Therefore, it cannot be that single-mandate Members do the job any better than dual- or multiple-mandate Members. I could go on and on with various statistics about multiple mandates, Committee Chairs and various other Members —

**Mr Shannon:** Keep going.

**Miss McIlveen:** Time is limited, Mr Shannon.

I am left to wonder whether the motion is a UUP motion, a Conservative Party motion or, indeed, a UCUNF (Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force) motion.

Is the UUP simply tugging its forelock to its Conservative Party masters? Have the big house unionists taken up residence in the gate lodge?

2.45 pm

If the First Minister were to be excluded from being an MP, that may weaken Northern Ireland's lobbying position at Westminster. The DUP does not send a B-team to represent Northern Ireland's interests. From a unionist perspective, that is exactly what happened until the Stormont Parliament was prorogued in the 1970s. As a result, Northern Ireland lost out.

It seems that because the UUP cannot defeat the DUP at the polls, it will try by some alternative means. I am inclined to believe that the motion is based on sour grapes and green cheese. The issue of dual and multiple mandates is being considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. It is unnecessary to request the UK Government to bring forward legislation to prohibit dual mandates. Such legislation would be grossly unhelpful when the best method to deal with the issue is by a phased approach, which would ensure that the wealth of knowledge that exists is retained while, at the same time, nurturing fresh talent.

Northern Ireland is undergoing vast change in its governance, particularly at local government level, and

it is vital that there is smooth transition. To ban the talent that currently exists, who sit in the Assembly and on local councils, across all parties, would not be helpful. The motion is premature. Discussions are still ongoing in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and the motion is simply an attempt to short-cut and circumvent those discussions. In any event, it is up to the electorate to decide.

**Mr O'Loan:** I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"calls on the UK Government to bring forward legislation to prohibit dual mandates in the devolved institutions and the UK Parliament; and requests that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee reports with recommendations for a definite timetable for ending dual or multiple mandates in this Assembly, including interim deadlines for prohibiting dual mandates being held by Ministers."

At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of Ballymena Borough Council. I have no embarrassment whatsoever in making that declaration and proposing amendment No 2, because my party's view is that the dual mandate needs to be brought to a conclusion. The discussion is about the manner in which that is done, and it needs to be done in a measured manner.

Therefore, I move amendment No 2, which stands in my name and in the names of others from my party. We believe that the matter needs to be addressed, but in a careful and considered way. The original motion is weak in that regard. It does not say what the legislation should contain. It says merely that legislation should "prohibit" dual mandates, without any indication of how or when that should happen.

The issue is complicated and tricky. Decisions could be made on the issue that might not lead to a good end. Therefore, it needs to be thought through carefully. My party believes that that thinking is not well provided for in the original motion, and that is why it has tabled its amendment, which it asks the Assembly to support.

Amendment No 2 is better than amendment No 1. It is clear in outcome: its goal is the abolition of the dual mandate through legislation at Westminster. It is clear on how to get there: to refer the matter to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, asking it for recommendations for a definite timetable to end the dual and multiple mandates in the Assembly, and to provide a specific timetable for the end of dual mandates that are held by Ministers, which are a particular and important issue.

The DUP amendment is better than the original motion. Nonetheless, it gives no real indication of the direction of travel or the intended destination. To that degree, it is unsatisfactory. It puts the matter much too much on the long finger.

I will summarise the essential arguments against the dual mandate. The Assembly needs to be aware of

widespread public comment on the issue. It is addressed frequently in the media, and when it is addressed by the public and through the media, it is in critical terms. People are critical of dual and multiple mandates, which, essentially, they see as holding down two or three jobs at once. They ask why that should be the case and believe that it should not be so.

There is the difficulty with the workload that is carried. If each of those roles, certainly at Assembly and at Westminster level, is viewed as a full-time occupation, people ask how someone can carry both of those jobs. Quite naturally, they ask why one person should receive two substantial payments for their political work. I note what was said about the reduced-pay arrangements between Westminster and the Assembly. However, that certainly does not fully address public concern on the issue. The public ask a fundamental question about whether such arrangements provide value for money.

The second important point is the issue of conflicts of interest, which, clearly, arise routinely when a Member belongs to two Chambers and particularly when that Member has Executive authority. The worst case arises when Ministers make decisions that affect other arenas in which they operate.

The Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, has been mentioned. As the Minister with Executive responsibility for the Planning Service, he has no inhibition about making representations to the Planning Service on planning cases that arise in his constituency. A person whose judgement leads him to that conclusion is not the first person I would approach if I want sound judgement on the matter of conflicts of interest.

**Mr Weir:** I appreciate the Member's point. However, will a person not make representations, irrespective of whether that person is an MP or a councillor? Someone who is a Minister and an MLA will encounter the issue of representing their constituents' interests vis-à-vis their ministerial interests. The Member's argument is not particularly pertinent to the issue of dual mandates.

**Mr O'Loan:** In this case, the Minister has the Executive authority for a Department that manages the Planning Service. It can be seen as a clear conflict of interest for him to make representations on planning cases. If he is approached by an individual, it would be natural and proper to offer to find someone else to make the representation on the basis that his doing so would cause a conflict of interest.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Loan:** With respect, I will not give way again.

The Minister of the Environment is a member of Belfast City Council and, amazingly, continues to sit

on its planning committee. That represents a transparent conflict of interest.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Nigel Dodds, is also a member of Belfast City Council. He makes, and routinely announces in the Chamber, financial decisions — particularly on the rating system — that directly impinge on councils. However, some people, evidently, do not perceive that as a difficulty. The SDLP thinks that that is a significant difficulty that must be addressed. The two key issues are the community's perception of workload and value for money, and conflicts of interest.

It is important not to overstate that case, because someone could argue that, when a person stands for election, the public can decide not to vote for a person who sits in another Chamber. People must recognise that our political parties have a great deal of power. When the public vote, they do so, by and large, for candidates that represent political parties with which the voter has an allegiance. Therefore, they will support that party's candidate. The public do not have a simple free choice in the matter, and it is possible for the public to elect the same person to two Chambers but, at the same time, to be unhappy with that situation. Members should recognise that reality.

If one wants a job done, a busy person is often the one who will do it. There are many examples of that, even in our own Chamber. Those of us who are MLAs and have no higher role in the Assembly regard ourselves as quite busy. However, MLAs who take on other responsibilities — such as Committee Chairpersons or Ministers — fill their roles successfully and undoubtedly work even longer hours than the rest of us. Those issues are not absolutes, but there is an argument that people who have other jobs outside politics bring real-life experience and add value to the Chamber. That point must not be dismissed.

In addressing the matter, we need to think about the business of implementing change — that relates to my earlier point about why the original motion is weak. Making those changes is not as easy as it might seem at first sight. An example of that is the discussion of the issue of severance for councillors, which everyone seemed to support, including the Minister. However, the closer it came to making a decision on that, obstacles started to loom, and people began to see that it was not as simple as they thought it was at first. At the moment, there is no severance scheme on the table at all.

The same must be thought of this matter. It needs careful consideration, and the bringing forward of well thought out proposals, when decisions are eventually made on the issue. That is why the SDLP amendment is a far more prudent and sensible one. It states that the matter needs to be addressed and brought to a conclusion. We need to abolish dual mandates, but that

must be done in a proper and considered fashion. I ask for support for that amendment.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (Mr McCartney):** Éirím le labhairt mar LeasChathaoirleach an Choiste agus ansin mar bhall de Shinn Féin.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, I can confirm that the issue of dual or multiple mandates is a matter with which the Committee can concern itself. The Committee identified the issue of dual or multiple mandates as one to be considered as part of its examination of the overall operation of Parts III and IV of the 1998 Act. There is a legal obligation on the Committee under section 11 of the St Andrews Agreement Act 2006 to report on the operation of Parts III and IV of the 1998 Act by 1 May 2015.

Although the matter of dual or multiple mandates is not an explicit feature of the Committee's work programme, in July 2007, as a first step, the Committee canvassed views from the leaders of the political parties represented in the Assembly on the issue. On 31 March 2008, the then Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, declared an intention:

"to work with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office in order to introduce legislative proposals to end the dual mandate of those councillors who are also Members of the Assembly and/or Parliament." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p3, col 1*].

At that time, in light of that announcement, the Chairman of the Committee wrote to the party leaders to offer them a further opportunity to let the Committee have more detailed views on the following: the preferred method for phasing out multiple mandates, for example, by way of legislation or self regulation; any priorities or time frames for phasing out multiple mandates; how each of the various levels of multiple mandates should be dealt with; and the scope for employing co-option arrangements in circumstances in which Ministers or Members might choose to resign as councillors.

The Committee also sought a meeting with the Minister of the Environment to explore more precisely what plans there were to legislate to end the dual mandate. That meeting took place a number of weeks ago, and was attended by myself, the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, Jimmy Spratt, and the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Environment Committee, Patsy McGlone and Cathal Boylan, who also have an obvious interest in the matter.

At that meeting, the Minister, Sammy Wilson, indicated that it was not his intention now to plan to legislate to end the dual mandate, and the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and the Chairperson of the Environment Committee

reported in that regard to their respective Committees last week.

It is worth noting that, for some considerable time now, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has been preoccupied with the very important matter of the transfer of policing and justice powers. However, I assure the House that the Committee does intend to return to the issue of dual and multiple mandates in due course.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I will now speak as a member of Sinn Féin. As I previously stated, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has been tasked with exploring the impact that dual mandates might have on the working and efficiency of the Assembly. Indeed, some preparatory work on the matter has already been carried out, and all the parties have submitted initial papers to the Committee for consideration. It is an issue to which the Committee has stated its intentions to return, and therefore, in some respect, the motion before us is ill-timed — or do I smell or suspect that there is an election in the air? That is for other people to decide.

3.00 pm

It is fair to say that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, at that time, took the position that it would wait until the then Minister of the Environment finalised her plans in respect of the review of public administration, in the belief that it would be premature of the Committee to consider the matter until she stated her intentions. Last Monday, the current Minister of the Environment briefed the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Committee for the Environment and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on his intentions, and that matter is now under consideration.

The proposals that Sinn Féin submitted in a paper to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee were underpinned by the question of whether dual or multiple mandates undermine the smooth running and efficiency of the Assembly, and that they should in no way permit any conflict of interest, real or perceived, to occur. We believe that the best way to resolve the issue is to allow the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to continue its work, and to await discussions within and between parties. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Dr Farry:** At the outset, I join other Members in expressing my sympathy for those who lost their lives and for those who were injured in the past few days. I condemn those brutal and murderous attacks, as any right-thinking person would do.

In addressing the motion, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. The Alliance Party is opposed to the motion. We lean towards the DUP amendment as, perhaps, the best and most realistic

way forward, although we have some sympathy for the SDLP amendment as well. *[Interruption.]*

I hear the heckling from the Members on my left; clearly, they missed the comments that the Alliance Party Members made last week on the economic policies that are being pursued by the DUP in the Executive. Let us not hear any more notions about how my party judges issues in the Chamber. We judge every issue on its merits; we use no other benchmark whatsoever.

In the context of the economic downturn, the motion strikes me as an exercise in navel-gazing. Given what has happened over the past few days, that comment is doubly important. The Assembly should be discussing issues that are directly relevant to the people of Northern Ireland whom we represent.

It would be easy for the Alliance Party to support the motion and claim the high moral ground. At the moment, my party does not have any MPs — although we are always hopeful in that regard — and we will continue to contest Westminster elections. The danger for my party is that it may fall into the trap that the Ulster Unionist Party — or the Conservative Party — has fallen into, which is that its motives in proposing the motion are not genuine, but are more a reflection of its current electoral situation. That is the inevitable conclusion that people will draw.

In the past, when the Ulster Unionist had MPs who were also Members of this House, it was never a problem for David Trimble, John Taylor and the others who availed themselves of that situation. The motion strikes me —

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member accept that the Ulster Unionist Party has attempted to limit that in recent years, and, in fact, the fallout with Jeffrey Donaldson began when he was not allowed to continue to double-job? Will the Member accept that a person cannot be in two places at once, and that, in recent years, in allowing Members to stand for Parliament, there is a clear indication that, if elected, such persons would stand down from the other role?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Dr Farry:** I am grateful for the intervention. I am almost tempted to say that the Ulster Unionists have done a wonderful job of limiting double-jobbing all by themselves in recent years.

The Member touched on a wider point that I was going to make. We must recognise that the public at large is concerned about this issue, and there are two fundamental things to say about that. First, political parties have the opportunity to regulate those matters themselves; if the Ulster Unionist Party is claiming to have given leadership in that regard, fair play to it — others may follow in its footsteps. It will be

interesting to see who the Ulster Unionists field in the Westminster election when it takes place.

My second point is that it is the electorate that ultimately regulates who gets and wins seats. When people have dual mandates, the electorate are fully aware of who they are voting for and the implications of that. Ultimately, therefore, we have to respect the views of the electorate about who they wish to represent them.

A particular problem exists with Ministers with regard to a conflict of interest. Declan O'Loan made a point about Ministers who hold Executive authority and who are also members of bodies that intersect with their ministerial offices, such as city councils. I recognise that, for example, Mr Sammy Wilson, as a constituency MLA, is perfectly entitled to make representations to any Department or any agency. That point needs to be separated out.

The wider problem is one of time management, and how people can give their all to two jobs and be in two places at one time. Certainly, my role as an MLA is enhanced by my role as a councillor, because I have a better understanding of what is happening in my area. Councillors are part time because it is envisaged that they would have other, full-time jobs in the community, and being an MLA may well be one of those jobs. Doing both jobs helps one to get a more rounded perspective of what is happening in one's area.

The crucial factor has to be that Members who have dual mandates give priority to the Assembly as their primary mandate and responsibility, and ensure that the business that happens in this Chamber and in Committees is not affected by our business elsewhere.

Westminster is a little more complicated because of the time and the sheer distance involved, and because being an MP is a full-time job. However, there can be a major overlap between the constituency work of an MP and an MLA. Again, there may be benefits in economies of scale in that respect.

In light of the events of the past few days, I was touched and moved by the opportunity for at least two of our party leaders to make comments in this Chamber on Monday morning about the murders in Antrim and then go to Westminster that afternoon and make the same comments.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Dr Farry:** That was one occasion on which the two different aspects of democracy in this country were useful to the community in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Campbell:** The issue of multi-mandates is one that the media love, because the issue for them is straightforward and simple: no one can be in two places at one time, no one should be doing two jobs,

and a person with more responsibilities cannot do their job as well as someone who has fewer responsibilities. The problem with that approach is the simple issue of the facts. I want to deal with two issues: payments and performance.

The DUP supports — and, I believe, there seems to be a broad consensus — the fact that we should work towards a single-mandate approach. However, our view is that we should do that by informing the public that it will, in fact, be a costly option. For example, the salary cost — which was the other side of the coin to which Mr O'Loan alluded — of each single-mandate MLA is £28,000 per annum more expensive than an MP who is also an MLA, because of the two-thirds reduction in an MLA's salary. Therefore, if we have, for example, 12 MPs —

**Mr McNarry:** That is a red herring.

**Mr Campbell:** It is not a red herring at all; it is factual. If we have 12 MPs who are also MLAs, it means that the public purse is £300,000 less well off than would be the case if those MLAs held a single mandate.

With regard to expenditure, it is an obvious conclusion that those who have one staffing allowance are more likely to spend more of it to pay for staff than those who have a staffing allowance from the Assembly and the House of Commons. An examination of the expenditure of MLAs and MPs will bear that out. So, we are in favour of moving towards single mandates, but the public should know that it will cost more. It will cost more to have single-mandate MLAs. As long as the public are content with that, and appreciate and have knowledge of that, it at least adds to the debate.

I want to turn to the issue of performance, because it is there that we find much that has not been alluded to, although Miss McIlveen did allude to it earlier in the debate. If we measure the performance of single-mandate MPs, in the current Parliament or in the 1990s, we would find that — not to put too fine a point on it — the fewer responsibilities that some MPs had, the worse their performance.

If we set aside the crucial matter of constituency duties, which elected politicians forget at their peril and which are impossible to verify independently, the accepted criteria for performance in the House of Commons — and to some extent here — are four fold: making speeches; voting; tabling questions; and tabling motions. It would strengthen the argument for fewer responsibilities if present or previous single-mandate MPs gave top-quality performances in all four categories. The case for that argument is weakened considerably when the precise opposite is found to be true.

I want to examine briefly the average number of questions asked, speeches delivered, votes made and motions tabled in the House of Commons. I have

compiled an average deliberately so that people cannot accuse me of cherry-picking. On average, DUP multi-mandate MPs have made 19 speeches in the House of Commons, and single-mandate MPs have made four speeches. DUP multi-mandate MPs have tabled an average of 101 questions, while single-mandate MPs have tabled an average of 63 questions, and DUP multi-mandate MPs have a 40% voting record, whereas single-mandate MPs have a 24% voting record. Again on average, DUP multi-mandate MPs have tabled five motions, whereas single-mandate MPs have only tabled 1·5 motions.

I will summarise to avoid any doubt about performances: multi-mandate MPs in our party table 60% more questions, have a 60% better voting record, have a 300% better record for tabling motions, and speak five times more often than single-mandate MPs. I would very nearly say that I rest my case. There is a considerable amount of work to be done before we can proceed to impose single mandates.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and support the DUP amendment. Although I have some sympathy with the SDLP amendment, I cannot give it the same support for reasons that I will explain. I speak as someone who believes that dual mandates should end. When elected to the Assembly in 1998, I resigned from Derry City Council. At that time, I was in my fourth term as a councillor.

The Ulster Unionist Party motion reflects the fact that that party has only one MP, who, indeed, may even be considering her position in the party. Therefore, the Ulster Unionist Party — if that is still an accurate description — may not have any MPs to be concerned about and, consequently, could have no women elected to either the Assembly or Westminster to take account of those bodies.

What is the motion about other than being a mischievous distraction? We are all aware that a very significant reform process — the RPA — is under way. That has been mentioned already. In that context, it is simply common sense to take forward the issue of multiple mandates. The sponsors of the motion know that well enough, but their intention is to foster division and to be opportunistic rather than to promote a strategic response.

When the Assembly was established in 1998, the Ulster Unionist Party had 10 MPs, half of whom held dual mandates. Did that party bring forward the issue of single mandates then? The issue of dual mandates is an anomaly that can be explained in the context of the development of politics and the difficulties with politics over a considerable period. However, it is an issue that can and must be addressed.

The key argument that goes to the heart of the SDLP amendment and with which I have one particular disagreement is that Sinn Féin has always sought to establish a sustainable agreement in the Assembly. Despite some efforts, that goal proved unattainable when the Ulster Unionist Party was the largest party in the Assembly.

The issue of dual mandates is inextricably linked to the demonstrable achievement of a sustainable and functional power-sharing arrangement.

3.15 pm

That arrangement may yet be tested from time to time. Reference was made to the tragic events of the weekend and yesterday evening, and as an MLA for South Antrim, I identify with the earlier comments that Members made. The statements from my party leader yesterday and Martin McGuinness this morning absolutely reflect my position on those tragic events.

Those were testing times for the power-sharing arrangement, but the parties stepped up to the plate. In doing so, they may have gone some way towards answering the question of whether the point has been reached at which a sustainable working arrangement is possible. If so, it becomes imperative to resolve the issue of multiple mandates.

The DUP amendment sets out a practical solution for the resolution of the issue, whereas the SDLP amendment fails to recognise the germane point that I have made. Therefore, on behalf of my party, I support the DUP amendment and oppose the motion.

**Mr Beggs:** I declare an interest as a local government councillor in Carrickfergus.

At the start of the debate, I raised a point of order on the potential conflict of interest of those who signed the petition of concern. Subsequently, I obtained a copy of that document from the Business Office. Members should bear in mind that those who signed the petition of concern have a direct financial interest in the motion not being passed and in the continuation of multiple mandates that generate additional income for those individuals.

Nigel Dodds is paid £62,000 as an MP and £37,000 as a Minister. He also earns £14,000 as an MLA and £10,000 as a councillor. All those figures are approximate.

Jeffrey Donaldson also signed the petition of concern. He earns £62,000 as an MP and £19,609 as a junior Minister. He earns a further £14,000 as an MLA and £10,000 as a councillor.

William McCrea earns £62,000 as an MP, a further £10,000 as Chairperson of an Assembly Committee and £14,000 as an MLA. I believe that he is still a councillor, for which he receives a further £10,000.

Ian Paisley Snr also signed the petition of concern, and he earns £62,000 as an MP and £14,000 —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** I did not give way earlier, but I may have time to do so when I have finished making my point. As an MLA, Ian Paisley Snr receives an additional £14,000.

I turn now to the “Swiss Family Robinson”. Iris Robinson earns £62,000 as an MP, £14,000 as an MLA, £10,000 as the Chairperson of a Committee, and £10,000 as a local government councillor. Peter Robinson earns £71,000 as First Minister, £62,000 as an MP, and £14,000 as an MLA — he stood down as a councillor.

Sammy Wilson earns £62,000 as an MP and £14,000 as an MLA. As Minister of the Environment, he has responsibility for local government and receives £37,000 for that role. However, he is still a local councillor, for which he is paid £10,000.

Each of the aforementioned has a direct conflict of interest in signing the petition of concern. The issue of dual mandates must at least be assessed to determine how those with a direct financial interest in their retention could thwart the will of the Assembly now or in the future — that is neither right nor proper.

**Mr Weir:** I wonder whether the Member has included his father in that list of villains to be condemned. In the 1980s, his father was, simultaneously, a Member of the 1982 Assembly and an MP. For 22 years, he had a dual mandate as a councillor and an MP.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has one extra minute.

**Mr Beggs:** The Member knows that the majority of those in the House, including him, are still councillors. Virtually everyone in local government who has not reached pensionable age remains in some type of full-time employment because the role of councillor is still regarded as a part-time position.

Certainly, as far as my own council is concerned, meetings occur in the evening. On Monday evenings, I frequently attend council meetings in my area when business in this House has been completed. If one were to examine my record of attendance, both in this House and in local government, one would not be disappointed. I have a reasonably good attendance record, and I make a contribution that I hope will be recognised.

Apart from DUP and Sinn Féin Members, the only other member of a devolved institution who holds a dual mandate — in either the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly — is Alex Salmond of the Scottish Nationalist Party. Michelle McIlveen indicated that she thought that that was a wonderful thing, and that he should be able to continue to do that.

Are she and her party aligning themselves with such a nationalist party?

When people have dual mandates, as Members of regional Assemblies and Westminster, it limits what one can do and where one can be. One cannot be in both places at the same time. Figures have been produced showing how Northern Ireland Ministers and MPs have been here for voting — presumably, on Mondays and Tuesdays they stay here — so, how can they be at Westminster if there were a vote there on a Tuesday?

**Mr Weir:** They get on a plane.

**Mr Beggs:** Therefore, late on Tuesday, or on Wednesday, they fly over to Westminster — they fly in and fly out — they appear on the television and take any media opportunities that they can.

Presumably, on Thursdays, they have Committees here — those of them who are not Ministers —

**Mr T Clarke:** Will the Member get to the point as regards the Member to whom Miss McIlveen referred and who has a voting record of 22%? He only sits in this House — he does not sit anywhere else. Will the Member list the Committees that his colleague sits on whenever he is here?

**Mr Beggs:** The Member will already know that the decision has been taken that the Member to whom he is referring will be standing down. *[Laughter.]*

How can any person commit the time and effort that should be given to a ministerial post or to being a Committee Chairperson by holding all those other jobs at the same time?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr Beggs:** I support the motion, and I am prepared to support the amendment.

**Mr Durkan:** I declare an interest as someone who holds a mandate here and in the Westminster Parliament, so I am one of those “plane” people of Northern Ireland who moves about from one place to another to make appearances.

This is not an unimportant issue. Obviously, in the context of current events, it is not the highest priority, but it is a matter of legitimate concern. It has already been addressed by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and that Committee has agreed that it needs to return to the issue. It is not inappropriate that we have a discussion on such matters.

The SDLP does not support the motion, as tabled, for various reasons. We do not believe that this is a matter that should be imposed upon the First Minister and deputy First Minister, particularly if they are reluctant advocates of the idea. We do not see the point of that.

We do not see that it would help the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in their wider work on relationships, to make a case relating to the circumstances of Scotland and Wales, and not just ourselves, in circumstances where the question of the dual mandate of the Scottish First Minister is a matter of controversy and contention in Scottish politics. We could do without getting ourselves embroiled in that, or having our position misrepresented. If we have an issue, we should address it on our terms and in our own way.

The debate should not be just about the question of the dual mandate between here and Westminster but should take in the issue of mandates at local government level also. That is why we have tabled an amendment that tries to deal with the issue, but in a way has regard to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's role, and has regard for the fact that this matter will have to be handled, and phased in, in an agreed way.

We prefer our amendment to the DUP's because it is quite clear that the DUP amendment is simply fudging the issue; it is about kicking the issue into touch or throwing it into the longest grass that they can find.

Miss McIlveen's speech proposing the amendment did not propose the amendment; it did not argue for the amendment and it did not say that anything would flow from the amendment. It was a case of defending dual mandates indefinitely. The DUP did not even mount a credible, rational, persuasive argument in support of its own amendment; it was actually discounting it as an issue to be addressed.

In circumstances in which the DUP does not believe that anything will flow from its own amendment, I do not see why any other party should labour under that illusion.

If the argument is for a phased approach, the SDLP amendment allows for that as well, stating that it is up to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to consider the issues and to bring forward recommendations for a definite timetable, which would take account of the opinions and arguments that have been heard.

Now that it is increasingly apparent that we have a settled process and working institutions, it is unacceptable for the dual mandate to remain indefinitely. At various times, all parties have stated in their manifestos that this matter must be addressed, and they have said that it is being regulated. However, Members lose credibility with the public when nothing different happens. We constantly use circumstances and mandates to justify the dual mandate, but people want more follow-through on the political commitments that we all make, so let us address ourselves to that. We would all face the same test in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Members have mentioned voting records, and as someone who sits in the Parliament here and in Westminster, I make no apologies for the fact that in Westminster, I do not take part in many of the votes for which I am present. I do not take part in votes dealing with local government, or other matters, in England and Wales unless I believe that a precedent or principle will be created that, in turn, might be extended, or applied, to here. If it does not, I stay out of it.

It is strange that the DUP attacks the UUP for its link with the Tories, because the knee-jerk reaction of DUP MPs is generally to vote with the Tories. If there are Tory amendments to Government motions, the DUP usually votes for them, unless it has been bought off with a promise, or the speculation of a promise, from the Government.

The SDLP has no problem with staying out of a vote on principle. Although SDLP MPs have the Labour Whip, often, if we disagree on a point of principle, we do not support the Labour Government's motions, or its amendments to Tory motions. SDLP MPs sit out votes; we do not vote on matters in which we do not believe, and we defend our proud record of strong interventions in Westminster. Nevertheless, as someone who holds two mandates, I have the honesty to say that one cannot juggle both indefinitely.

**Mr Weir:** I join with other Members in offering my condolences to the families that have been bereaved in the past 72 hours. Furthermore, in common with other Members who spoke, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council.

It is interesting that this motion is one of the first to come forward since the Ulster Unionist Party's link-up with the Conservatives — the UCUNF, or new force, in our politics. The DUP was accused earlier of being in some way close to nationalism. However, what is the import of the motion, if not to debar 108 British people from the British national Parliament?

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member accept that someone holding multiple mandates is frequently not in the British Parliament, and, therefore, cannot contribute to British parliamentary life? Such a person cannot create networks, cultivate friends and make people more aware of matters here. Of course, local MPs can turn up and vote on a matter that affects local government in England — something irrelevant to Northern Ireland — but, equally, they might not be there at key times.

**Mr Weir:** Indeed. However, the figures for this place and Westminster that have been mentioned show that DUP MPs have a better voting, speaking and questioning record — any criteria that one might choose — than any other single-mandate representatives. I am disappointed by the Member's remarks, but given the source, I am not surprised.

The motion is anti-British and anti-unionist. It is an attempt to debar people from Westminster. Let us consider the history of dual mandates. Between 1921 and 1972, throughout the term of the old Stormont, there was, in effect, a convention that meant that only on rare occasions did someone hold a dual mandate. Was that good for unionism? Were Northern Ireland's interests best protected, particularly from a unionist perspective, when the country plunged into difficulties in the 1960s? Did we benefit from having the B team at Westminster? The answer is no; we were utterly unprepared and, indeed, we failed to have any of our big hitters at Westminster.

3.30 pm

Members must question the timing of the tabling of the motion. For a number of years, the First Minister here was Mr Trimble, who was an MP and an MLA, and we had Mr Taylor. However, during that period, the silence of the UUP calls for the ending of dual mandates was utterly deafening. That is not surprising, given that of the 18 Members —

**Mr McClarty:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** I have given way once, Mr McClarty, and I am not giving way again. Of the 18 Members who sit on the Ulster Unionist Benches — with the honourable exception of the Rev Robert Coulter, I think — 17 of them have a dual mandate, have had in the past or have tried to obtain a dual mandate, so strongly do they feel about dual mandates.

Perhaps the party's current lack of electoral success is the reason for their feelings about dual mandates. Mr Beggs said that the party intended to limit its use of dual mandates, just as I have managed to limit my appearances for the Northern Ireland football team of late — I have not been selected. The Members opposite have found that this is the politics of sour grapes.

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member should announce his retirement from international football.

**Mr Weir:** I take this opportunity to announce my retirement from international football but not from my council seat. In 2005, Mr Elliott, as an MLA, ran in the Westminster and council elections. When I pointed out to him the hypocrisy of that, he responded by saying that I did the same. That is correct, but I do not have a problem with dual mandates; Mr Elliott is seeking to abolish them.

It has been said that this proposal has been made in response to the electorate. This might sound like a strange idea, but can we not allow democracy to decide? Can we not let the people decide who they elect and who they do not elect? During the debate, it has been said that parties have a high level of influence in elections and that voters simply troop into their polling stations and vote for the big names in their constituencies.

However, every MP who has stood for the Assembly has had running mates. As I look around the Chamber, it seems apposite to use the Strangford constituency as an example. The MP for that constituency is Iris Robinson, but, if DUP supporters were deeply annoyed about dual mandates, they had the opportunity to vote for Mr Hamilton, Miss McIlveen or even Mr Shannon, but Iris Robinson topped the poll.

The import of Declan O'Loan's comments, in particular, is that people need to be protected from their own stupidity and that they cannot be trusted to vote the right way, so the field should be skewed for them to ensure that dual mandates are removed.

The motion is a cheap electoral stunt by the Ulster Unionist Party. It cannot get its top people elected, so it wants to try to nobble the opposition and remove a range of people from the field. As the DUP amendment states, the issue is to be considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Let us not jump forward with this Ulster Unionist Party stunt. I urge Members to oppose that party's proposal and support the DUP amendment.

**Ms Purvis:** This is a difficult day to focus on the business of the Assembly, and it feels out of place to be discussing the regulation of mandates in the shadow of three deplorable deaths. However, I suggest that focusing on improving the quality of representation in the institutions that deliver to the people of Northern Ireland is an appropriate response to those who would like the peace process to fail. It is a small but meaningful act of defiance.

The motion has an admirable goal, but it suggests a convoluted way of going about it. We are asking the Executive to ask the UK Government to do something that we should be doing ourselves. The primary reason for limiting the number of elected offices that any individual can hold relates to quality. It is imperative to ensure that the quality of the representation that citizens receive is as high as it possibly can be.

When an elected official carries more than one mandate, he or she will run into a number of conflicts, the most benign being a conflict of time. It is not possible to be in two places at once, and that is particularly challenging for individuals who represent one area at one level and a different area at another level. That gives bifurcation a whole new meaning.

At least 76% of Assembly Members — including the authors of the motion — have the commitment of another elected office outside this Chamber. Although I appreciate that most will argue that they possess the intellectual capacity and physical fortitude to meet the demands of delivering two jobs at once, there are issues, needs and constituents who will slip through the cracks in such a situation.

However, the more disconcerting problem is that of conflicts of interest. That issue has been raised on a number of occasions as we go through the review of public administration and as the Assembly and the Executive take decisions that impact on the form and functions of local councils. That is being done despite the fact that the majority of Members of this Chamber are also sitting members of local councils.

In their most insidious form, there is a danger that conflicts of interest could influence the work of Members of this Chamber, meaning that those Members are not representing the needs of their constituents, but those of specific groups or individuals. I am certain that no one here would deliver such an allegation against another Member today, but the issue is not simply about whether a conflict of interest can be proven — it is about whether there is a perceived conflict of interest. The appearance of corruption can be as damaging as corruption itself, and democratic institutions must be formed in such a way that any possible opportunities for actual or perceived misdeeds are removed. That is especially true for this Assembly, where we still have a lot of work to do to build confidence among all members of our communities in the ability of this body to deliver for them.

Additionally, democracy is about participation. The more people who participate in Northern Ireland's decision-making processes, the better the outcome will be for all of us. Looking around this room at times, it is a dizzying sea of blue and grey, and it is not just the suits that are grey. This Chamber is badly in need of more young people, more women, representatives of minority ethnic communities, and newcomers to this Province, who could bring new perspective and new ideas to the work of this Assembly.

It is absurd to suggest that the 108 people who have been elected to this Chamber are so vital to the well-being of this Province that they are required at every level of public office. There are more than 1.5 million people in Northern Ireland; the odds are that there are quite a few people out there who could be just as good or even better than we are at preaching in this Chamber, in local councils and in Westminster. At a time when people are fighting to keep one salary coming into their households, it is a bit outrageous to suggest that there are Members of this Chamber who deserve two, three, or even four or more layers of compensation.

It is also inaccurate to argue that voters select those people and question why we are interfering in that process. In our electoral system, the voters do not select the candidates — the political parties do. I note with interest the DUP amendment, which refers the matter back to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The authors of that amendment are correct that the issue has been on the Committee's agenda —

it has been for the last two years. In two years, we have seen very little meaningful action from that Committee on this issue. The SDLP amendment would add clarity to the situation with the Committee and I am happy to support it, although I remain sceptical as to whether it would help to speed things up.

We have an obligation to ensure that we are delivering the best possible system of decision-making and governance for, and with, the people of Northern Ireland. Under that standard, there can be no argument for maintaining multiple mandates. I look forward to continuing work with my colleagues on this issue.

**Mrs Hanna:** As Mark Durkan has said, the Ulster Unionist motion has no timescale and recommends leaving the matter with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but the SDLP does not believe that that would work. There was an expectation that this issue would be legislated for, following the outcome of the review of public administration. I should declare an interest as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which has already been mandated to deal with this issue.

As Raymond McCartney stated already, in March 2008, Arlene Foster stated that she intended to introduce legislative proposals to end the dual mandate of councillors who are also Members of the Assembly and/or Parliament. Members will recall that, having led by example by resigning from Fermanagh District Council, the Minister stood in the Enniskillen by-election six months later — last September — in an endeavour to secure a DUP win.

That illustrates clearly that some Ministers will blow with the party political wind, and it underlines the need for legislation that cannot be negotiated away by party politics.

Unfortunately, we now have a Minister of the Environment who has a quadruple mandate. He states that there will be no laws developed to prevent a representative from holding more than one mandate and he has declared that he does not share Arlene Foster's opinion on dual mandates. Therefore, those are the views of our two DUP Ministers of the Environment.

The SDLP acknowledges the public's concerns about multiple mandates, including the fact that two, three or four salaries can be drawn down at once with double, triple or quadruple mandates. I know that Gregory Campbell has said that he can make a good economic argument for that, but I would like to see the figures.

It is understandable that, given the high level of political uncertainty in the past, it has taken a couple of years to have a more stable Assembly and for the time to be right to take the issue forward. With the review of public administration due to give more power and a larger workload to local government, it is important

that the public have effective public representation, and that can best be delivered with a single mandate. However, the Assembly has had two DUP Environment Ministers with diametrically opposed views on the matter.

It is important that the matter is referred back to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, where it has been for the past couple of years. The SDLP amendment calls for that; for common sense; and for the timetable for ending dual mandates to be referred back to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee — as already mandated by a DUP Environment Minister. However, it is hard to see the principles of the DUP Ministers on the issue.

I will comment on some of the presentations made during the debate. Michelle McIlveen made absolutely no case — even for her own amendment. It was just a beauty contest, and a case of whose party is bigger. It was all about votes. We have had an awful lot of that today. For a party that has had two Ministers holding responsibility for the issue, the DUP has not made any case for or against it. The matter has just been batted about, with the DUP saying that its party is bigger than the other parties, and so it does not have to worry about doing something that might be good for everyone.

Raymond McCartney spoke as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and stated that the matter should be legislated on.

Mitchel McLaughlin made a very sensible contribution, although I am still not sure why he is opposed to the SDLP's amendment. On several occasions he said that the amendment was good and sensible, but that he could not quite agree with it. However, during his contribution, I could not figure out what he could not agree with.

Stephen Farry talked about the amendments being the moral high ground: I just think it is sensible and is avoiding a conflict of interest. I would have thought that that was a good enough reason.

I support the SDLP amendment. It is the sensible way to deal with the matter. There should be a timescale and the matter should go back to the Committee that has already been mandated to deal with it.

**Mr Hamilton:** Members will be very pleased to hear that I will not be participating in any beauty contest. *[Laughter.]* I would be worried about my contribution to the swimsuit round.

I apologise for missing the initial part of the debate. However, from what I have sensed — despite the banter — there has been general agreement from all quarters that we all see the ending of multiple mandates as an objective. Amidst the banter, there has been discussion on the means by which we can achieve that

aim, and I believe, fundamentally and firmly, that all parties hold true to that.

I agree with Mr McLaughlin: I can understand why we have got this anomalous situation as he described it. The instability of political arrangements in Northern Ireland over the past few years has generated such a situation and, as it took time to create that situation, so it will take time to rectify it.

3.45 pm

I do not understand the position adopted by that new British political force, UCUNF, which suggests — I agree with Mr Weir on this — such an obviously anti-democratic and anti-British position. To effectively bar British citizens from running for election to their own sovereign Parliament is not something that I consider to be democratic. It is certainly not in the finest traditions of British parliamentary democracy.

I suggest that it is also anti-devolution, which I believe is the point that Mr Durkan made, to tell the people of Scotland and Wales what they should be doing. Surely that is a matter for them. It is the nature of a devolutionary settlement that they are sovereign over their own affairs. We deal with our own matters and would not appreciate Scotland and Wales interfering — to adopt any other stance would be quite despicable.

Given the context of how far we have come, a phased approach is the best way forward. I have different views on how to achieve that. It may be principally a matter for individual parties to deal with. However, Mr Weir touched on the point that, ultimately, it is a matter for the people to decide. We all sit here because the people put us here. They are the ultimate arbiters on all of these matters. If the people do not want Members to have more than one mandate, then the people will decide that matter. That is something for them — if the electorate do not want us to represent them in more than one place, they can deal with that.

Some of the benefits of multiple mandates have been discussed. I heard Dr Farry talk about the duality of the roles in councils and in the Assembly. There is some benefit in sitting in both places. Mr Campbell made the case that there is a financial benefit in having more than one mandate. I believe that there is also some benefit — as Mr Weir usefully stated — in senior politicians here developing long-term, beneficial relationships with their counterparts at Westminster.

I find it difficult to grasp the approach of UCUNF Members, who say that they are speaking for the people when they are really echoing the media. Consequently, the Assembly debates motions that are dictated by the editorial pages of the 'Belfast Telegraph'. Looking at the record of UCUNF Members, one might assume that they are somehow whiter than white, have some higher moral standard and that they do not engage in that sort of behaviour.

It was easy for them to put forward the motion, because — on the principle that the people decide — the people have decided that, in many cases, they do not want Ulster Unionists to represent them in even one place, never mind in two.

The examples were cited of Mr Trimble and Mr Taylor, who sat both here and in Westminster, without a word being said; and of Mr McGimpsey, who sought dispensation to run for Parliament in 2001. The example was given that 11 of 18 Ulster Unionist candidates in the 2005 general election were Members of the Assembly, including the two people whose names are on the motion — Mr Kennedy and Mr Elliott.

Therefore, for the Ulster Unionist Party, on this matter, it is a case of do what they say, not what they do. In fact, some of those 18 Westminster election candidates, such as Mr Burnside, cannot handle one mandate, never mind two.

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

**Mr Hamilton:** A phased approach, as outlined by our amendment, is the most sensible way to progress on this issue.

**Mr McNarry:** I thank all who have contributed to the debate. In light of recent events — terrorist murder back on our streets, innocent men gunned down by low lifes, new widows created, and grieving parents and children plunged into despair — I honestly did not have, at the start of the day, the heart for this debate. However, I must take part. I must push myself to ensure that the evil that has revisited to destroy all that I fervently believe in does not succeed.

Thanks be to God that we in this place do not need bullets in order to make our points and that the message that was sent out yesterday and today — no matter how difficult it was for unrepentant British unionists such as me, who have worked for change and for a better Northern Ireland — has been unequivocal. I recognise that debates in our democratic institution have won the day, and that they will continue to win over the darkness that hangs over our country. That said, I trust that my point about democracy was well made and heard.

What, then, is the point of introducing a petition of concern for this debate? We all know that that is nothing short of a wrecking mechanism. It is a sure sign that those who bring forward a petition of concern have no confidence in their own argument. That is what we have here — the DUP using a wrecking mechanism to attempt to hide its obvious embarrassment over its standout role in the use of dual mandates.

The Ulster Unionist Party, first and foremost, believes that Northern Ireland deserves the same quality of public representation as Scotland, England

and Wales. However, if a Member of Parliament is also a Member of this Assembly — and even, in many cases, a member of our Executive — they cannot possibly claim to serve the people in their parliamentary constituencies sufficiently. Double-, and often triple-, jobbing should not be allowed to continue. Hence our motion.

Through tough negotiations over a decade ago, Northern Ireland now has a viable form of devolution. However, many crucial political decisions are taken in London every week to which Northern Ireland makes a less than substandard contribution. Why should people here not have an equal say about fuel excise duty and foreign policy as people in greater London? The banking crisis is having a much-felt impact on Northern Ireland. However, with only two MPs whose full-time jobs are at Westminster, we get little opportunity to express our feelings about those problems in our national Parliament.

A few hours each week is a totally unacceptable time for our Members of Parliament to spend in Westminster. Would we regard a public-service worker who works one day a week as a full-time worker? Would we be happy if we were paying that worker a full-time wage, even if they had two other full-time jobs? Of course not: that would be a gross abuse of public funding. Why, therefore, should it be acceptable for Members of Parliament to do such a thing?

It is no surprise that I am delighted that the Conservative Party has supported Ulster Unionist calls for an end to double-jobbing. In the near future, we will, we hope, have legislation in place that will prohibit that abuse of the political system. We also hope that it will focus minds as we have good reason to believe that it is the intention of the next Government to legislate against double-jobbing.

The DUP amendment is cowardly, to say the least. What is so wrong with calling for legislation that will inevitably increase the quality of our representation at Westminster? The DUP amendment mentions a “phased approach”. Frankly, that is ridiculous: we need clear-cut legislation that prohibits dual mandates.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister should take the lead and make representations to the United Kingdom Government detailing Northern Ireland's concerns with the current set-up. We all share those concerns. Of course, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are themselves guilty of dual mandating. Therefore, I am not surprised that the DUP amendment so cleverly attempts to deflect attention to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. However, surely they are responsible enough to look past their personal circumstances to see what we are trying to do.

The Northern Ireland Assembly is the only devolved institution in the United Kingdom in which double-jobbing is not frowned upon; unfortunately, it seems totally acceptable for members of the DUP and their brothers in Sinn Féin. Indeed, the entire DUP parliamentary team are Members of the Assembly; all nine of its MPs sit alongside us in this Chamber. Then again, it is nearly seen as a prerequisite that if one wants to be a DUP MP, one has to sit in the Assembly. One would almost think that double-jobbing is written into the job description of a DUP MP; and it appears that Sinn Féin is following suit.

We have a First Minister who is also an MP, and a deputy First Minister who is also an MP. We have a Finance Minister who is also an MP. The Regional Development Minister, the Environment Minister, the Culture Minister and the Agriculture Minister are all double-jobbers. A Sinn Féin/DUP working party, acting in concert, is what is represented here and in the membership of Westminster. Therefore, we must ask which of their responsibilities suffer — is it their Northern Ireland Executive work or their Parliament work?

I have listened to the debate, and I have heard what Members have said. I am not surprised that the DUP, having aligned itself with republicans in this House, is willingly aligning itself with the republicans in Scotland.

Interestingly, DUP Members left out the point about dynasty. There was no mention of the dynasties that operate within the DUP. There are two in existence, and one — optimistically — in the making, and that new dynasty will perhaps be carried into Europe. We will see how that works out.

I want to say the following to Sinn Féin members: in Westminster, they cannot sign in, but they have signed up for the money and for the finance to have a free presence in London. They must deal with that. I hope that they reflect on that, because I have reflected on the long and welcome journey that they have made to be here in this House; this democracy. I know that they still have a long way to walk before they enter into the mother of Parliaments, and I encourage them to take that walk as soon as they possibly can.

Minister Campbell, who was sitting on the Back Benches earlier, made the case for value for money on the basis that he is a BOGOF (buy one, get one free) Minister. His proposal was buy one, get one free — or half price. That was a spurious argument from a Minister who is saying, “Vote for a DUP MLA, and you will get him or her as a half-price MP.” The electorate's answer, the next time it goes to the polls, will be “No way”, and the DUP is going to know it. I am sorry that the Minister could not do better and that that is his best argument.

The Minister also omitted to mention another important point. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is important to Northern Ireland. How important is it to the DUP? Northern Ireland Ministers cannot sit on that Committee. Indeed, Gregory Campbell sits on no parliamentary Committee. Despite all the facts that he put forward, he forgot to tell us that fact.

The debate has been good and necessary, and one on which we should move in the fullness of time. Ulster Unionist Party Members tabled the motion, and we are grateful for the interest in it, which has resulted in two amendments. We shall support the SDLP amendment and encourage the House to do likewise.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if it is made, amendment No 2 will not be called, and I will proceed to put the Question on the motion, as amended.

*Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 24.*

#### AYES

*Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Dr Deeny, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mrs McGill, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Bresland and Mr Hamilton.*

#### NOES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Elliott, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Beggs and Mr Elliott.*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 47; Noes 26.*

#### AYES

#### NATIONALIST:

*Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Mrs McGill, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.*

#### UNIONIST:

*Mr Bresland, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

#### OTHER:

*Dr Deeny, Dr Farry, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Bresland and Mr Paisley Jnr.*

#### NOES

#### NATIONALIST:

*Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey.*

#### UNIONIST:

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McNarry, Ms Purvis, Mr K Robinson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Beggs and Mr Elliott.*

Total votes	73	Total Ayes	47	[64.4%]
Nationalist Votes	31	Nationalist Ayes	19	[61.3%]
Unionist Votes	37	Unionist Ayes	23	[62.2%]
Other Votes	5	Other Ayes	5	[100.0%]

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

That this Assembly notes that the issue of multiple mandates, including council membership, is to be further considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee; and believes that a phased approach to this matter represents the best way forward.

*(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] In the Chair)*

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Violence Against Teachers

**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 the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech, and all other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr D Bradley:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increasing reports of violence towards school principals and teachers; and calls on the Minister of Education to address this matter urgently, by establishing a joint working party with the recognised teachers' unions, statutory agencies and other stakeholders, to ensure that uniform recording and reporting mechanisms are in place for all schools, that a training and awareness programme is developed for all teachers, and that principals and governors are provided with appropriate advice and guidance on dealing with violence against staff in schools.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil an-áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo.

I am delighted to participate in this important debate.

I express my condemnation of the murder of Constable Carroll near Lurgan last night, and I express my sincere condolences to his family and colleagues.

Corporal punishment in schools in Northern Ireland was abolished in 1987, which was 22 years ago. At the time, there was a general welcome for that move, and schools adapted quickly to develop new codes of conduct. The majority of pupils have abided with those codes of conduct.

Since then, further child-protection measures have been introduced. Again, they have been welcomed by teachers, parents and the general public. Unfortunately, measures to protect teachers have not kept up with measures that have been introduced to protect children. As I said, although most children adhere to codes of conduct in schools, a small percentage of children, albeit a growing one, do not abide by those codes of conduct and involve themselves in physical and verbal attacks on teachers.

That entire area of school life — violence against teachers — has largely been ignored by authorities. However, it causes increasing concern, and the Assembly cannot continue to ignore the issue. To do so would be to allow a growing problem to continue unchecked until it is well-nigh impossible to bring under control. Members are aware that society has changed. The behaviour of children, albeit a small number of them,

has grown increasingly challenging for their parents and teachers to manage. It is not unusual for that behaviour to manifest itself in violence against parents in the home and against teachers in the school setting. We must remember that violence is not only physical but can be verbal.

Surprisingly little work has been done on that aspect of school life. Last year, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) carried out the most comprehensive investigation into assaults against teachers in Northern Ireland. The union surveyed the Department of Education, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the education and library boards, Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (NICCEA) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Its survey discovered that the Department of Education does not collect information on assaults against teachers. NICCEA did not respond to requests for information from the teachers' union. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta did not collect or compile information on assaults. CCMS began to collect information only after 2005, in accordance with the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 (RIDDOR).

The five education and library boards did collect information. However, there was no consistent procedure for collecting it, and no clear route along which the information was passed. There were no guidelines for follow-up on incidents, such as risk assessments. There was no clear policy training, nor were support services available. Such an approach might be best described as being a recipe for disaster.

One clear finding of the INTO survey is that the number of assaults is increasing gradually and alarmingly. Between 2002 and 2007, assaults on teachers increased from five to 69 in primary schools; from five to 85 in post-primary schools; and from 56 to 68 in special-education schools. The number of incidents during that period increased from 63 to 173, which was an increase of almost 200%.

Therefore, assaults on teachers are clearly a growing problem that the Assembly cannot continue to ignore. Nor can it continue to approach the matter in the haphazard way in which it is dealt with at present. If the Assembly continues to approach it in that way, there will be more and more incidents in which teachers are injured, become ill or are absent from work. Moreover, their lives will be sorely affected. Pupils will lose tuition, and the cost to the public purse will become greater.

The Assembly cannot continue to ignore the problem. The question arises about what can be done and what must be done. First, the Assembly and the Minister must make a clear statement that any assault

or violence against a teacher is unacceptable. We need to commit to a zero-tolerance policy.

4.30 pm

We also need an assessment of the scale and scope of the problem. As I said earlier, there is a haphazard approach to the collection of information on the issue, and we do not know what is going on. If anything, the problem has been under-reported. I understand that the Department has agreed to conduct a survey but that the necessary resources are not yet available to action it. We all understand that budgets are under severe pressure. However, this is a serious health and safety issue that we ignore to the peril of the health and well-being of teachers. We need a commitment to carry out that survey to give us a clear picture of the situation.

Also, we need to stop covering up the problem. As I said, the information that we need is not readily available. It is as if we have been afraid to bring the problem into the open and deal with it directly. We need publicity and information on the number of assaults and the level of violence against teachers in schools. The House must ensure that all teachers know what to do if they are assaulted. A clear statement must be displayed publicly in every school to the effect that violence, in whatever shape or form, is totally and utterly unacceptable.

School governors must ensure that they know what to report, when to report it and where to report it to. The House must consider recommending that governors report annually on the number of assaults and violent incidents in their schools. We need to look again at regulations that allow violent parents and carers into schools. In England and Wales, the law on trespass has been successfully incorporated into the education regulations in order to allow principals and governing bodies to exclude individuals who act with violent intent towards teaching staff. The House must introduce such regulations in Northern Ireland in order to ensure that schools that are forced to exclude violent individuals can do so with confidence that they act within the law and in the best interests of staff and pupils.

Although violence is a major health and safety concern, there is no overall health and safety structure in the education system. There must be a ministerial commitment to establish a strategic health and safety committee involving the recognised teachers' unions. Such a body could advise the Minister and the House on the overall way forward on various issues that impact on the health of the teaching workforce.

The Minister and her Department are wedded to the vision of "every school a good school", and several policies have that as their title or subtitle. Until the House addresses the issue of violence, publicises the zero-tolerance approach in every school, trains and informs every teacher, audits the level of assault and

gives schools the necessary — and deserved — guidance and authority to tackle the issue of violence, schools will not be safe. Before every school can become a good school, they must become safe and secure schools for pupils and staff. Teachers who feel secure can deliver the revised curriculum in the confidence that they are free from the risk of violence and assault.

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

**Mr D Bradley:** I commend the motion.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):** I want to preface my remarks by extending my sincere sympathy to the family of Constable Stephen Carroll and to those who loved him dearly.

As the Chairperson of the Education Committee, I inform the House that the Committee considered the Irish National Teachers' Organisation report on assaults in schools that was adopted at the INTO northern conference in 2008.

Prior to my taking up the post as Chairperson, the Committee reflected its concerns about the growing number of assaults on teachers — and INTO's nine recommendations to address that matter — by asking the Department to make an important addition to the terms of reference of a proposed school workforce review. The Minister agreed to add the subject of the health and well-being of all school-based staff to the issues to be addressed in that review.

The school workforce review is a strategic review of school-based staff. It is an important review, examining the personnel, finance, pay and management dimensions of all school staff. The timescale of the review scheduled interim reports in September and December 2008, with a final report by March 2009. However, I am concerned that the work of the review has been substantially delayed, and I ask the Minister — who is in the House today — to inform Members of the position of that important review and tell us when its final report will be available.

I will now make some comments on a personal note with regard to the motion. I support the motion, and commend my Deputy Chairperson on the Education Committee, Mr Bradley, for bringing the matter to the House. In his remarks, he referred to the fact that society has changed — I think that that is true. Many of us say that, in some respects, it has not changed for the good, because many of the values that would be described today as old fashioned have been thrown out.

It is not that many years ago that I was at school — *[Laughter.]* I knew that would bring a smile to your faces. There were certain people whom one respected and certain institutions to which one gave regard — the local clergyman, the local policeman, and one's teachers. They were people whom one respected and in

whom one placed a sense of importance. However, for various reasons, the trust in many of those institutions has broken down. We now have a society in which, unfortunately, there are dysfunctional homes. There are no longer those parents who feel that it is necessary for them to bring up their children in a way that will lead them to give respect to their teachers.

I concur with the comments of the NASUWT, which are that staff are entitled to work in an environment that is free from violence and disruption; that staff are entitled to appropriate access to training and support on behaviour matters; and that pupils are entitled to a safe and orderly learning environment, together with effective teaching and support to assist them in achieving their full potential.

We need to ensure that our schools are safe environments for teachers and pupils. It is regrettable that we do not have the statistics that are gathered by the Department. We need to ensure that the administrative arrangements for boards of governors and the Department of Education are robust enough to protect teachers and that when incidents occur — as, unfortunately, they do — we can deal with them in a way that addresses the particular needs of the pupils and protects the teachers, who are an invaluable asset in our schools

**Mr O'Dowd:** Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an rún.

I support the motion, and I welcome the debate because it allows expression to be given to the need for proper services, not only for teachers, but for young people in our schools. I apologise for not being present for the beginning of the proposer's speech, but I listened carefully to the figures outlining the number of young people who are involved in assaults or abuse of teachers — particularly primary-school teachers.

We must ask ourselves why there has been an increase in attacks on primary-school teachers. Those attacks are being carried out by primary-school children; that is surely a reflection of broader society. We should support those primary-school teachers by gathering information on the number and frequency of attacks and gaining a better understanding of the nature of the abuse. We must also understand why children between the ages of five and 11 are attacking their teachers. There is something wrong —

**Mr Storey:** As a parent, as well as someone who has an interest in the issue of education, one of my concerns is that children are, by and large, no longer innocent. They are not innocent in their primary-school days. There are children who are subjected to a culture that feeds them, at an early age, through videos and DVDs, with some of the most vile and reprehensible filth, which gives them a sense that if something can be done in a video, it can be done in a classroom or in the playground. That is an issue in wider society that we cannot ignore.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member's comments more likely belong in another debate, but the issue boils down to parental control. I know that Mr Storey did not intend to stereotype all children, but I am not keen on doing that across the board. Our children are still innocent, and there are young children who want to be young children. However, if a primary-school child is attacking a teacher, that suggests that there is something seriously wrong in the family home of that child, and it may well be that the circumstances that the Member described are part of the problem. We must provide support services for those children, and we must identify what is going on in those homes at an early stage.

I heard the figures that Dominic Bradley quoted with regard to secondary schools. We must be careful not to paint the picture that our secondary schools are war zones; they are not. The vast majority of our young people are responsible and good people, who attend school and reap the benefits and opportunities that youth brings.

**Mr D Bradley:** I will point out to the Member that on two occasions, I said that the pupils who are involved in this type of behaviour are in a very small minority.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I accept that; I was not being pointed in my comments towards the Member. I was saying that those observing, or the media reporting, this debate must be careful not to portray our secondary schools as war zones. I accept that the Member said that only a small number of pupils are involved in attacks on teachers.

It is not only the working lives of the teachers concerned, however, that are affected, regardless of how many pupils are involved. Their private lives are affected, because they bring the trauma of physical or verbal abuse home with them. There is an onus on the employers and the Department of Education to ensure that we provide the services that are required to support teachers in those circumstances. We must gather information and corral it in such a way that will allow us to understand properly what is happening. We must also ensure that once that information is gathered, we provide those teachers with a support network so that their welfare is at the centre of everything that we do.

Therefore, I welcome the fact that mechanisms exist in the Department of Education for that purpose. Can they be improved? There are very few areas of Government practice that cannot be improved. If this debate results in the creation of sound proposals, they should be taken on board by the Department and the employers in order to ensure that if there are services that we are missing out on, or if existing services are not being properly resourced, we do everything in our power to correct that situation, so that teachers receive all the support that they need.

We must also ask ourselves why young people in secondary schools are attacking their teachers. Where necessary, we must assist young people from troubled backgrounds, who have troubled lives and who have been disadvantaged throughout their lives, and give them a chance to become good and model citizens in society.

We must get that balance right. The protection of teachers, young people and the wider school environment — although not involved directly in attacks — must be balanced.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat.

4.45 pm

**Mr B McCrea:** I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I join other Members in offering my condolences to our brave officers in the PSNI. I have been away from the House for much of the morning and afternoon discussing that issue, and I was struck by the amount of unity and cohesion, and the willingness to get things done.

At the risk of introducing a little bit of levity into what is a serious subject, when I first read the wording of the motion on violence against teachers, I was not sure whether it referred to the transfer test, the education and skills authority, the review of public administration or one of the many initiatives that the Minister of Education has brought forward. I was also somewhat dismayed by the tone of the exchange that took place at the Committee for Education this morning. I mention that point because, if this place is to survive, it is extremely important that we remain relevant to the people of Northern Ireland. We must demonstrate to everybody that we are in a position to deliver the improvements that people expect.

It will come as no surprise that all Members are against violence in schools. Mr O'Dowd, who is no longer in the Chamber, questioned why there is violence in schools. I am concerned about the level of domestic violence, and I think that the two issues are connected. There is no doubt that children who grow up in abusive homes must express that experience in a different way. I am struck by the similarities of the issues that we are trying to deal with, including better recording by the PSNI and the need for a better understanding of the significance of what we are trying to do. Mr Bradley raised that point: one cannot fix what one cannot measure.

We need a joined-up approach and co-ordination to deal with crime against our education system. To date, it seems that such an approach from the Department of Education is strangely lacking. Certainly, many Members considered the difficulties that schools in the

east of the Province have experienced. At one school, there was a long-standing debate that seemed to damage not only the people who were involved directly but those on the periphery.

The key question is: how do we ensure that our teachers do not feel vulnerable and isolated, and that they receive the necessary advice, support and confidence from the wider community? It is not only the teachers whom we have to look after but the children whom they teach. It is extremely difficult for teachers to work in an environment in which they fear for their physical safety.

I am not a great supporter of many of the reforms that will be introduced under the education and skills authority; that much is known. However, the RPA gave the Minister of Education a number of opportunities to address those issues, and I urge her to prioritise them. The issue of domestic violence often goes unsaid; however, it is a cancer in our education system. The problem is not that the number of cases is small but the fact that it happens at all.

Members referred to the issue of recording, and something must be done about that. I was struck by what Mr Storey said about the need for respect. It appears that many of our teachers fear to deal with problems in the classroom, because they do not feel that the disciplinary code supports them. Rather, they feel that it supports those who cause the problems. We must find some way to provide teachers with that specific level of help. When teachers are assaulted, they need help, advice and guidance, because they can feel somewhat out of sorts.

I will finish by addressing why we are in this position. It seems that we have an overzealous, litigious and rights-based culture. People may ask what causes the problem, but if our culture encourages violence in some way, exemplified by recent events, we should not expect it not to have an effect on our young people. We are reaping what we have sown — people cannot have rights without responsibility. If people are put in a position of trust, they must also be given the authority to do the job properly. On that basis, I hope that the Minister takes on board my party's suggestions. We support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** A mobile phone is interfering with the sound equipment. I ask the Member who owns that phone to switch it off.

**Mr Lunn:** I have a terrible feeling that that is my phone — it is definitely off now.

Before I commence my remarks, I associate myself with all the expressions of sympathy to the bereaved following the dreadful events of the past few days.

We welcome all aspects of the motion. I assume that, like us, the proposer of the motion held discussions

with the trade unions, because the motion reflects their views and their wish list for the future. According to the published statistics, there seems to have been a downturn in the instances of violence towards teachers: in 2002-03, there were 365 suspensions for physical attacks on teachers, compared to 186 in 2007-08. However, it is widely recognised that those figures are unreliable as a true indicator, because they refer only to the offences that are punished by suspension. The evidence from the chalk face contradicts those statistics. It appears that there are hundreds of unreported incidents, which clearly points to the need for the uniform reporting and recording mechanism to which the motion refers.

I understand that INTO and employers were working on a survey document to assess more accurately the true level of attacks. As Mr Bradley said, that document was sent to the Department some 10 months ago, but no response or agreement from the Department has been received. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

There is a clear definition of assault, and we should encourage the reporting of all physical assaults. However, where would foul or abusive language or threatening behaviour rank on the scale of violence? That is important, because such behaviour can make teachers' lives difficult and, if unchallenged, can easily turn into physical assault. Such violence can include the use of weapons, even at primary-school level. It is not just pupils — parents and carers can be equally guilty. Anecdotally, that is not uncommon at primary-school level in particular.

Having said all that, our schools are in no way out of control. We need a standardised and accurate reporting mechanism. We await the Department's response on that.

The motion also refers to a training and awareness programme, which is a timely suggestion for teachers, principals and governors that we welcome and support. One matter that that programme could address is exclusions. There appears to be a difference in the incorporation of the law of trespass in England and Northern Ireland, which Mr Bradley mentioned. That difference seems to make it much more difficult to enforce an exclusion order over here than on the mainland, or it may mean that principals here are reluctant to even try enforcing one.

In 2007, if the figures are adjusted to reflect population differences, there were 10 times more expulsions in England than there were in Northern Ireland — 1,500 compared to seven. I am not encouraging mass expulsions; they are the last resort, but I still ask whether the legal impediment is the reason why there are so few expulsions here. As Mr Bradley asked, why will the Department not endorse the posting of a zero-tolerance statement in every school? That seems

such a simple and basic measure. There are many ways in which we can make life less difficult for teachers, some of which are in the motion, which we support wholeheartedly, but there are others.

No teacher should have to work in fear, or under threat, of violence from pupils or parents; neither should they be subjected to abuse. If a teacher lays a hand on a pupil in this country, his or her job is on the line — unjustifiably so in many cases. One particular case in my constituency involved Mr David Bell, who, after touching a pupil's chin, has been unable to work for seven or eight years. That seems ridiculous, and I suggest that a balanced approach to such cases would be no bad thing. Notwithstanding that point, the Alliance Party supports the motion.

**Miss McIlveen:** It is sad that the matter has even to be debated in the Chamber. What is the state of society when the Assembly finds itself debating violence against teachers and school principals? I realise that the figures probably seem low when taken out of context; nevertheless, the available statistics are appalling. In 2006-07, there were 182 physical attacks on staff in post-primary schools, and in 2007-08, there were 132 such attacks. It is simply breathtaking to discover that in the same periods, there were 66 and 54 attacks respectively in primary schools.

Last year, I put a question to the Minister on the level of teacher absence through stress. It is little wonder that in response to that question, I discovered that in 2007-08, some 473 teachers fell ill, resulting in the loss of 18,698 teaching days. The issue, therefore, goes beyond physical assaults.

Clearly, teachers are not being provided with a safe, comfortable working environment or the appropriate tools to deal with an unruly class and/or problem children. It is clear that neither the causes nor effects of such behaviour are being addressed.

I do not want to restate the case for the good old days, as argued by my colleague the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Although probably longer than I would like to admit, my school days are probably not as long ago as those of the Chairperson. When I was at school, pupils in my peer group at least had respect for teachers, policemen and others in positions of authority. I remember that we stood as a mark of respect when a teacher entered the classroom. That may have been unusual at that time; it is particularly so now.

As Members said, teachers have the right to carry out their duties without fear of physical or verbal abuse. However, teachers are confronted with physical or verbal abuse from not only pupils, they fear abuse from certain parents. I am sure that many in the Chamber will have heard from those employed in the profession some horror stories about teachers being abused.

In May 2008, I asked the Minister what plans she had to introduce a policy to reduce the number of assaults on teachers in schools. Her response was that her Department planned to hold a workshop in the autumn. The Assembly has not heard about the outworkings of that workshop; indeed, as mentioned by the Chairperson of the Committee and the Member who proposed the motion, the Department remains policy-light on the issue.

Teachers are leaving the profession because they consider that they receive little support from parents, and they, therefore, feel powerless. Children as young as four years old are attacking teachers. In 2006-07, according to the response to a question from Mr Bradley's colleague Mr Burns in November, some 16 children of that age were suspended.

To pick up on a point that Mr Lunn raised, it appears incredible that, despite the need for suspensions, almost every disciplined child has been allowed to return to school. We must question whether suspension is an appropriate and effective means of punishing a child, as he or she may regard a few days off school as a reward for bad behaviour. Parental input and support are, therefore, vital in tackling the problem.

Concern has been expressed about the number of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties who spend an inordinate amount of time on waiting lists for assessment by educational psychologists. I am not saying that children who engage in physical and verbal assaults necessarily have emotional or behavioural difficulties, nor that the opposite is true. However, to leave children waiting for assessments and appropriate treatment for such lengths of time is asking for trouble.

I will outline, by board area, the most up-to-date figures that I have for children waiting for assessment: 267 in the Belfast Board; 593 in the North Eastern Board; 421 in the South Eastern Board; 516 in the Southern Board; and 242 in the Western Board. That is clearly not acceptable.

5.00 pm

My colleague Mr Moutray asked the Minister a question earlier this year about the waiting times for statutory assessment of special educational needs. The Minister advised that boards have 16 weeks in which to complete the assessment from the date on which they notify parents that they are considering making an assessment, or from the date on which the request to carry out the assessment is received by them from the parent or the school.

It is clear that there is a problem in our classrooms. It affects teacher morale; it affects the employment and retention of best quality teaching staff, and it affects the education of our children.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask that the Member draw her remarks to a close.

**Miss McIlveen:** We cannot stand idly by and allow that to continue. I impress upon the Minister that work needs to be done.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank Mr Bradley for proposing the motion: indeed, there are two Bradley names attached to the motion — Mr and Mrs Bradley — but I do not think that they are cohabiting.

I am pleased that I can contribute to the debate. I want to pick up on something that the proposer of the motion mentioned, which is that despite the fact that there are a number of incidents of violence in schools at the moment — and that number is growing — there are a lot of good children in our society. That needs to be recognised and focused on. We must remember that a very small minority of children are violent toward teachers.

There is no doubt that violence against teachers is a plague on our society, and it is growing. We must look at what brings it about. Several issues are involved, the first of which is discipline. Mr Storey said that there was respect when he was at school. I will not debate with him now about which of us was at school last — we will keep that for a private conversation. However, many of us recognise that there was discipline and respect, and that they went together.

Sometimes, there is lack of discipline and respect; not only for teachers, but for wider society — and one only has to look at the antisocial behaviour that goes on in many of our towns and villages to see that that is the case. I have noticed that the school windows in my own village are broken on a weekly basis. Fires are started, and graffiti is written on walls; but where is the discipline? Are we encouraging bad behaviour, at times, through lack of proper discipline, as one Member has just alluded to?

We do not have to go back to the old ways of 60 or 70 years ago. However, we do have to look at the methods that we use. And the same goes for society: we must look at methods for instilling respect on one side and discipline on the other. That means society — parents, communities, churches and schools — working together.

It is only right that parents should recognise when their child has misbehaved and has been violent towards a teacher. If parents do not recognise that, how is the child going to realise that he or she has done wrong? There is a huge onus of responsibility on parents.

I have talked to teachers who have been the subject of violence from their pupils. It is a hugely harrowing experience, and it surprises me that more teachers do not suffer incidences of emotional breakdown. It is an extremely difficult situation to comprehend — some of

the pupils who carry out violence against teachers are known, and their families are known, by the teacher. That creates the added difficulty of having those families living in the community.

There is a gap in the Department's policy on the matter that needs to be examined closely. The teachers' unions have flagged up, and my colleague Basil McCrea has alluded to, the fact that there are no figures — there is nothing against which the incidents can be measured. That is my first point: we need better statistics on the degree of difficulty we are facing. We need that first.

Secondly, we need to look at the background and see where that can be improved. Thirdly, we need the support of the Department. I am sure that we will hear from the Minister later on how she is going to develop this. Teachers, and the community at large, badly need the support of the Department. That is one of the big gaps. They feel that they are isolated and do not have the support that they are crying out for.

**Mr McCausland:** I support the motion. We live in an increasingly lawless society, and, only too frequently, we see evidence of that on our streets. Society is breaking down in many ways. We see it within families and in antisocial behaviour, which has been mentioned already. That is reflected in schools. The behaviour of young people outside schools is replicated in many ways inside schools. Increasing lawlessness is a trend throughout the British Isles and, indeed, much of western Europe. In Northern Ireland, in particular, such behaviour has been reinforced and encouraged by many decades of violence.

That is an observation on the state of our society, but what are the issues for schools? First, we must consider the rights of teachers. Much emphasis is placed on the rights of pupils, but employers have a duty of care towards the teachers they employ. This issue cannot be ignored. Therefore, the Department of Education and other employing authorities have a responsibility to address the matter.

As well as the rights of teachers, the rights of other pupils must be considered. The bad and violent behaviour of a small minority of children in a classroom significantly affects the other children, whose right to education that small minority disrupts.

I welcome, and wholeheartedly support, the motion. Levels of violence against teachers vary throughout the Province, and the situation is more acute in some areas than in others. In addition, there is significant variation among the boards in the number of expulsions and suspensions, and that is why a joint working group should be created in order to deal with the matter on a Province-wide basis. There is a clear need for a policy, and a strategy, to address the problem of violence against teachers.

My teaching career ended approximately 25 years ago. I taught in a secondary school in Belfast, and, even then, there was a problem with violence against teachers. I remember one teacher being attacked by a pupil who decided that that was a good way in which to get expelled from the school. Another teacher had to give up teaching as a result of an assault on him. That was quite a few years ago; there was a problem then, but is it not the case that the problem is somewhat more acute today? As a governor of several schools, I am well aware of the situation that we face.

We have talked about schools, but one cannot divorce this issue from the role of the family. The importance of parental support for schools and teachers is sadly ignored by many people. A joint working group would be able to analyse research, consider current statistics and prepare a policy and strategy to address the problem, which is complex and has many contributing factors. Therefore, there will be no single, simple resolution; rather, a multifactorial resolution will emerge from that joint working group in terms of policy and strategy.

Such a resolution must include proper funding for psychology services to address the long delays in children's receiving the right diagnosis, treatment and support. We need to ensure that the psychology services are adequate to address the needs that exist.

There are also issues regarding the family, and parenting skills and classes have a role to play in that. Some parents have difficulty in accepting and addressing the responsibilities of parenthood: perhaps they had a difficult upbringing. The joint working group would consider such issues.

Schools should also provide classes in citizenship and teach children about the importance of respect for others, as well as respect for themselves.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr McCausland:** The media have a role to play with regard to what they set out as the perceived norm for children. I encourage Members to support the motion and say that the Department of Education has a solemn responsibility to take it forward.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I wish to be associated with the comments that my colleague Dominic Bradley made about the sad deaths that have occurred over the past two or three days.

It is shocking and worrying that we are discussing attacks of any nature by children and young people on teachers — a profession that used to command respect. Throughout the 1970s, many calls were made for the end of corporal punishment that was, so often, delivered upon school-age children — a call that was,

eventually, heeded and legislated for in an effort to protect the rights of children.

In today's society, we are trying to preserve the rights of teachers and principals to teach in an environment that is free from all forms of abuse from children or young people who, at one time, would have been thought to have been incapable of such acts. Thankfully, there has not been a fatality in Northern Ireland as there has been in England, where a principal was stabbed at the school gate. However, there is always a chance that there will be a fatality where there is the threat of any type of violence.

If the relevant mechanisms are not in place, we will have to depend on parental control to ensure that such situations do not arise: however, that is lacking in many families these days. In order to protect the child and the educator, it is essential that the procedures detailed in the motion are established and implemented without delay.

The teaching profession has been hit hard in recent years, with some teachers being physically assaulted by children who are in their first year at school. Those children need help; and, in the majority of cases, that help should come in the form of early intervention. However, the teacher is being left to deal with the incident and the after-effects.

During many debates in the House, Members have used the phrase "zero tolerance". Many teachers' unions are calling for zero tolerance when it comes to any abuse — be it verbal or physical — in the classroom. I have no doubt that all Members have sat on school boards at one time or another. I, for one, find nothing more disturbing than tales of a child attacking a teacher or another child in his or her class.

I recall a memorable incident from recent times in which an eight-year-old abused his classmates and teacher regularly. When he was sent to the principal, he physically attacked the principal. Sadly, that is a familiar story, and it leaves me in no doubt that now is the time to do what the motion calls for so that the teachers and principals can have renewed confidence in the educational environment.

I call on the Minister to act without delay on the issue and to reinforce the Department's commitment by providing the necessary information and resources to allow educators to combat and deal with attacks in the proper manner.

The creation of a working party, in the first instance, would give all concerned a sign that the Department is being proactive in its approach to attacks, and, in conjunction with all stakeholders, would be a positive in the sea of negativity surrounding the teaching profession at this time.

I support the motion that was moved by my colleague Mr Bradley who, as a former teacher, has only the best interests of teachers and pupils at heart.

**Mr Poots:** I welcome the opportunity to address the motion, although we should not have to be debating such an issue. It is ironic that the proposers of the motion come from the SDLP. We are in this position because of the liberal, namby-pamby attitude that permeates through society and which makes it impossible to deal with individuals who demonstrate aggressiveness and bad behaviour. The SDLP was the great enunciator of the Belfast Agreement and all of the human rights legislation that flowed from it.

5.15 pm

There are human rights for those who behave aggressively, but the human rights of the victims are not given equal importance. I see that Mrs Bradley is shaking her head, but that is a fact of life. The Commissioner for Children and Young People is an ex-SDLP Assembly Member, and she has squandered over £100,000 of public money in seeking to enforce her views that a parent cannot physically discipline his or her own child. Let me say this: the banning of corporal punishment in schools was the biggest enhancement of the problem that we are addressing today.

No public servants — whether they are ambulance drivers, Fire Service staff, police officers, school teachers or nurses — deserve to be punished for carrying out their job. None of them deserve to be assaulted or to be the victims of aggressive behaviour. However, the truth is that that is happening on a daily basis because of the human rights legislation that exists, which protects the human rights of the aggressor but not those of the individual who is being attacked.

Ultimately, if we are to deal with this issue, we need to wind the clock back. The sanctions that can be taken against those pupils who are aggressive to other pupils and teachers are detention, suspension and expulsion. Very often, children do not attend detention when they are given it. When a child is given a suspension, it is worn as a badge of honour, and they say: "look how cool I am, I have just got suspended from school for a number of days, or a week." Suspension is no punishment — the children stand outside their school sneering and making fun of those who are actually attending school. Unless we wake up to the reality that there has to be a punishment that is suitable to the crime that is committed, we are going to be debating this issue again in another five years' time.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am a bit astounded at the line that the Member is taking — are you telling this Assembly that you would support corporal punishment?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order; the Member should direct his remarks through the Deputy Speaker, not directly at another Member.

**Mr McCarthy:** Sorry; you are disciplining me, obviously. *[Laughter.]*

I then, Mr Deputy Speaker, ask the Member whether, in view of all that he said, he is actually asking this Assembly to support schools reverting to what went before, which is the corporal punishment of youngsters?

**Mr Poots:** I am now astounded that Mr McCarthy could think that that is such a bad thing. I suspect that every one of us who attended school attended in a period when corporal punishment was implemented, and I do not see many of us having taken much hurt from that. I was subjected to a fair degree of corporal punishment in school, and I deserved every single bit of it — it did not do me one button of harm. I would be quite happy for schools to introduce corporal punishment and for my children who attend school to be dealt with in that manner if they misbehaved. There is no need for this particular nonsense; that is, the argument that we cannot have corporal punishment in schools or smacking within the home in order to discipline our children.

**Mr McCausland:** I intervene at this point to recall a comment that was made by the Minister of Education in her former incarnation as a promoter of the West Belfast Festival. A noted pop singer of the period refused to take part in one of the festival's concerts because of the stance taken by certain circles in west Belfast at that time regarding punishment beatings. I remember well that the Minister of Education said that it was not a black and white issue. In light of that interesting comment regarding punishment beatings, I want to hear her views on Mr Poots's comments about corporal punishment.

**Mr Poots:** I will let the Minister answer that herself. That sort of corporal punishment is more of a black-and-blue and broken-bones issue, and that was not what I was suggesting for schools.

There was corporal punishment in schools for many years, and it is not anathema; it is not something that is wholly wrong —

**Mr Dallat:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Poots:** My time has gone. I wish the Member had asked me sooner, because I would have loved to have had the opportunity to deal with his point.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member please draw his remarks to a close?

**Mr Poots:** However, violence against teachers will continue if we do not have the means to deal with it, and there is nothing in the proposal that will deal with it.

**Mr K Robinson:** Before I begin, I wish to express my condolences to the families of the three members of the security forces who were murdered over the

weekend. The House is still shocked at the onset of violence again.

I declare a vested interest, as I am a governor in two primary schools. As someone who has had the benefit of the cane, both as a pupil and as a school principal, I have a certain sympathy for some of the things that Mr Poots said, although I am not sure in which order that sympathy lies.

We have a problem with violence against teachers, and that has always been endemic in schools. However, it appears to be a growing problem. The frightening thing is that it has moved downwards from secondary-school level, where young teenagers — adolescents — were trying to portray themselves as young men or young ladies who could go against authority and had the willingness to do so, to primary-school level. When teachers in the lower levels of primary schools — P1 and P2 — are being assaulted fairly regularly, we have a problem.

Where does that problem come from? Many Members have suggested that there is a latent problem of indiscipline in some homes today. That problem is then transported into the school system. There is a widespread lack of respect for authority, in all its shapes and forms, and for authority figures right across society. Teachers fall into that category, and they bear the impact of that societal failure.

The impact of such behaviour on individual teachers is something that we often forget, and it can be devastating for those professionals. The effect ranges from simple embarrassment that it has happened to them, to disbelief. There is a loss of confidence: how and why did it happen? There is a sense of anger as to why it happened to them. There is a fear of repetition: it has happened once, could it happen again? Sometimes that leads to the serious illnesses that have been mentioned by other Members. Sometimes it leads to a desire for a teacher to leave a school or, worse still, to leave the profession and rob it of many latent skills and abilities that future generations will miss out on.

The reaction to violence against teachers has a wide range of responses. There is the support of colleagues in the school, which is usually very positive; there is the backing of the senior management team and the principal of the school, which, again, tends to be positive; there is the intervention of the chairman of the board of governors, if the matter moves on to a serious level; there is the role of the relevant officers of the education and library board, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) or the other bodies that have oversight of education; and then there is the rather detached role of the Department of Education.

**Mr Elliott:** Does the Member agree that the support of the parents of the pupil who has been violent to the teacher is equally important?

**Mr K Robinson:** Yes, I agree with my colleague and thank him for his intervention. The role of the parent is absolutely pivotal. If the parent arrives at the school and believes that wee Jimmy has done nothing wrong and that the problem is the fault of everyone else, it is a lost cause. However, if the parents come to the school and accept that wee Jimmy has done something wrong, and they wish to help to sort out the problem, that is of benefit.

Immediate colleagues in the school will be supportive, and the principal will — hopefully — have a disciplinary scheme in place that will support the teacher and involve the parents, as well as the board of governors. A serious case will be referred to the education and library board or CCMS officers, who will, hopefully, provide specialist support. Again, several Members commented on the lack of help from educational psychologists, and that is something that should concern us all. That help must be available at a fairly early stage, and guidance must be given to the teacher and the school.

The Department, of course, will have its guidelines — the Department has guidelines for everything. The school, as a corporate body, is in a difficult position, because it is torn between the need to address the individual incidents, and the need to do that without attracting the adverse publicity that may surround such behaviour and attach a negative label to the school as an institution.

The unions may support their members who are assaulted but be tempted to make a cause célèbre out of the issue, perhaps in pursuit of a national agenda, dare I say?

Teachers, schools, parents and pupils — all those involved — must recognise that violence against teachers exists and is a problem. If our children are to be educated, teachers require the respect of their pupils, the respect of parents, and the respect of school authorities in all their many guises.

The school must maintain a positive public perception that it is a well-run, disciplined institution that sets standards and has policies that are accepted by parents, pupils and the community that the school seeks to serve.

We must ensure that initial teacher training prepares young teachers in particular to enter the profession in their early days with the techniques and knowledge that will enable them to control the classroom and command attention and respect. Those courses should be regularly repeated throughout teachers' school careers. Principals, governors, board officers and departmental officials must also attend such courses. That will guarantee that the issues involved are understood and that a consistent approach is taken in addressing those issues by everyone involved in our education system.

The role of the parent in ensuring that their children adhere to clearly identified school policies on behaviour and discipline is central to the smooth working of any school. It focuses attention on behavioural parameters that the school has set down in its disciplinary policy and ensures that that code protects every child who attends the school.

**Dr Deeny:** I support the motion. As Members said, the vast majority of pupils are law-abiding and are not involved in abuse or violence; however, it takes only a small number to create a major problem, and we have had life-and-death evidence of that in recent days. At this point, I express my sympathy and condolences to the families of the three people who lost their lives in the past 72 hours.

*(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] In the Chair)*

I am interested in the subject of violence against teachers because many of my relatives and relatives of my wife are teachers. As a doctor, I suggest that the issue is bigger than people realise. The Chairperson of the Education Committee, who has left the Chamber, talked about the respect in which various professions were once held — I must talk to him about not mentioning the local doctor. That was the case, and we see that in society nowadays.

Teaching is a valued profession and teachers valued professionals. After all, we entrust them with our children for a large part of the day. Teaching was always stressful, but it is becoming more so. Our teachers must be protected, and society and we, its elected representatives, must see to it that that is the case.

After a great deal of pressure, zero tolerance was introduced into Health Service hospitals; it does not yet apply to health centres, but that should also happen. Zero tolerance should also be introduced as a written policy in all our schools and educational institutions. It is important to ask why that should be done. People talk about a lack of discipline in families and in society, which may be the case, but that lack of discipline must not be brought into schools. Regardless of a young person's background or social circumstances, there should be a law against verbal or physical violence and abuse in our schools.

As GPs, we see the major health consequences — mentioned by Dominic Bradley — of violence against teachers. Many of the teachers that doctors see are suffering. I suspect that those cases are not documented and do not involve pupil suspensions. Yet teachers arrive with symptoms and signs of ill health, particularly mental health — stress, anxiety, insomnia and depression. We doctors are signing teachers off work because of the health impact of their jobs. That is due to the abuse — and the fear of potential abuse — that teachers experience.

5.30 pm

The effects on other pupils have been mentioned, and I will also touch on that. Other pupils suffer emotional problems, such as fear and anxiety. They also feel threatened and may feel bullied into siding with the pupil who is the aggressor.

I think that the proposer of the motion mentioned that teachers may be working when they are unwell due to mental-health issues. Through no fault of their own, they may not be performing up to standard, or they could be off sick. Teachers who have been abused verbally, which is being threatened — or physically, which is being assaulted — must have the total support of their principals and their school governors. Sometimes, I think that principals are not sure what protocols or procedures to follow to give full support to the teachers. I am aware of situations like that.

I am aware of teachers in my area who are currently not working because of the health consequences of the situation. The unions must step up to the mark and ensure that the rights of disorderly and aggressive pupils do not supersede, diminish or displace the rights of teachers. That is very important, and it has already been mentioned. There should also be a standard protocol in legislation for all schools about how principals and governors should deal with violence and abuse against teachers. This problem is bigger than we think. We need action now in the form of appropriate legislation, and I support the motion.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join with my colleagues in extending sympathy to the family of Stephen Carroll.

I welcome this debate, which raises an important issue that faces staff in schools. Attacks on staff — whether physical, verbal or electronic — are totally unacceptable. Teachers are the most valuable asset as we seek to equip our children for the challenges of life and work. For the most part, teachers are equally valued by their pupils, the parents of their pupils and by society in general. In Ireland, we have some of the best, and most highly committed, teachers in Europe.

I gcás ina mbíonn múinteoirí faoi bhagairt drochíde nó ina mbíonn drochíde a thabhairt dóibh, áfach, caithfimid teacht ar an mbealach is fearr chun an bhagairt a laghdú agus caithfimid smaoineamh ar an mbealach is fearr le tacaíocht a thabhairt dóibh. Cé go bhfuil an bhunfhreagracht agus an dualgas cúraim ar fhostóirí na múinteoirí maidir le sábháilteacht agus folláine san áit oibre, is ceist í seo a bhaineann le chuile dhuine againn atá bainteach le cúrsaí oideachais.

Where teachers are under threat of abuse or where they experience abuse, we need to consider how best to minimise the threat and how best to support them. Teachers' employers have the primary responsibility

and duty of care in relation to safety and well-being in the workplace. This issue concerns all of us who are involved in education.

We need to build a culture of democracy and respect in our schools. Respect needs to be earned. If children and teachers feel valued in their workplace, there is much less likelihood of violence against, or bullying of, teachers or pupils. I am not sure that I agree with the terminology "zero tolerance", although I understand the concept behind it. We need to make sure that our teachers are supported. However, in some cases, we are talking about children who have emotional and behavioural issues. There are a couple of things that I would like to say about that.

We must consider the language that we use regarding violence against children and teachers. That is something that we can debate and discuss. I put clear blue water between me and the Member who argued that corporal punishment should be brought back. I distance myself from that view. I also point out that any use of corporal punishment in our schools is illegal.

When I hear statements like that, I am glad that I instructed my departmental officials to work with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) and Amnesty International so that we can build a culture of rights in our schools.

As a former human-rights and equality spokesperson, I also want to distance myself from the comments that were made about rights and equality. The institutions that we have built into the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement — an agreement that the Member's party supports — are very important. I find the Member's attack on the Children's Commissioner surprising, and I want to distance myself from those comments, too. I want to put on record my support for the work that the commissioner is doing in very difficult circumstances.

Another Member from the same party attributed to me what is a misquotation. It is absolutely incorrect. I want to put on record my absolute abhorrence of punishment beatings. I have always been on record as saying that. I ask people not to play politics with the very important issue of violence against teachers.

One area of concern is the current patchy recording of incidents in schools. Draft guidance that is currently being drawn up seeks to provide schools with a simple mechanism for recording incidents and for liaising with their employing authority to ensure that robust statistics are kept. As matters stand, only incidents that result in suspension or expulsion of pupils are likely to be recorded by a school and come to the employing authority's notice.

Chomh maith leis sin, níl meicníocht ar bith ann chun taifead a choinneáil de theagmhais ar áitreabh

scoile a raibh daoine eile páirteach iontu, mar shampla tuismitheoirí nó tríú páirtí.

Moreover, no mechanism is in place to record incidents on school premises that involve others, such as parents or third parties. During the 2006-07 school year, pupils were suspended 1,829 times for verbal abuse of staff, and 248 times for physical attacks on staff. The following year, pupils were suspended 1,799 times for verbal abuse, and 186 times for physical attacks on staff. I hope that the topic's current high profile will encourage schools to keep accurate records of incidents so that we might observe patterns and changes. I am pleased to be able to inform members that considerable work has been undertaken in the past year.

The working group was established, and it held its first meeting on 12 May 2008. Since then, there have been four meetings, and a further meeting is scheduled for this month. To date, the group has organised a workshop to examine the extent and nature of teacher abuse. That workshop was held on 20 November 2008. In addition, the group has drafted a revised guidance document and is currently working on that to take account of feedback from the workshop and advice received from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). I hope that the revised guidance will be available to schools early in the new year.

It is likely that the working group will recommend that posters be put up in schools to warn that perpetrators of violence—for example, visitors or parents—will be prosecuted in cases of attacks.

The focus of the school workforce review is primarily on structures, but it will also take on board the outcomes from ongoing work on violence against teachers that is undertaken by joint working groups with unions and employers.

I also want to echo some of the comments that were made—by Basil McCrea, I think—on the high level of violence against women and children, and the significant impact that that has had on our schools. I share those concerns. The levels of violence are totally under-reported, and that is borne out by PSNI statistics. I have had a couple of meetings with Women's Aid, and I am currently working with that organisation and my departmental officials to ensure that we deal with emotions in the curriculum at the appropriate age level. I look forward to working with my colleagues on that.

The working group has reviewed the existing guidance document, 'Security and Personal Safety in Schools', which was published in 1997, and has identified a number of areas that requires updating, in the light of the advance of modern technology. Those include the comparatively new potential for abuse through the Internet and by mobile phone. The group has examined the guidance that is available to schools

in England and Wales, and at research undertaken by teachers' unions that operate in both jurisdictions.

The Department will also be looking at what is happening in the South of Ireland. I will be addressing INTO's all-Ireland conference during the Easter break, and it is one of the issues that we will be looking at.

I will also take this opportunity to acknowledge the positive input made to the working group by teachers' unions here. They have been instrumental in drafting the proposed guidance and in sharing their experience of the problem. As I said, a workshop was held in November 2008. Invitees included serving teachers and principals, as well as representatives from the employing authorities, the Department, the teachers' unions, members of the Labour Relations Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the PSNI.

The event was hosted on my behalf by my permanent secretary, as I was unable to attend due to an unexpected clash of dates, with the first meeting of the Assembly Executive in many months. Attendees were invited to consider the proposed revised guidance and to offer feedback. It was a useful exercise, as it enabled the working group to take on board the views of people working on the front line. A further redraft of the guidance is being undertaken by the working group, informed by comments received at the workshop, and further advice is being sought from the HSE. The working group has not yet decided on any specific recommendations regarding training and risk assessment in schools, and it is awaiting advice from the HSE.

The working group hopes to have the redraft completed in the near future, and it will then be able to put it forward for consideration by the teachers' negotiating committee. I hope that the work will be completed and updated guidance available to schools early in the new school year.

As well as looking at prevention of abuse, it is vital that we offer support to teachers who are unfortunate enough to experience it. I am, therefore, pleased to note that the employing authorities recently agreed to extend the provision of counselling services to all teachers. That service will be available from 1 April 2009, and it will take the form of a 24-hour confidential telephone helpline. Teachers can also avail themselves of face-to-face counselling and a range of welfare services through their employing authorities. Members will know that children also have access to counselling services in post-primary schools, and I have extended that to primary, and special, schools.

A parallel joint working group is looking at a wider strategy relating to teachers' health and well-being, with particular regard to stress.

In the case of abuse perpetrated by pupils or other school staff, the school may make use of the provisions of its discipline policy for pupils, or agreed procedures

for staff discipline. In the case of abuse perpetrated by parents or other third parties, consideration may be given to civil or criminal action.

Tá mé ag súil go mór leis go mbeidh baint leanúnach ag an Roinn, ag na fostóirí agus ag ceardchumann na múinteoirí chun an obair thábhachtach seo a thabhairt chun críche.

I look forward to continued involvement from the Department, employers and the teachers' union to progress that important work.

There will always be differences in people's perception of abuse, and one person's reaction to an incident may be unlike another person's. It is important that we avoid situations in which school staff feel compelled to make a complaint and, equally, that we avoid becoming overly apprehensive. The vast majority of school staff's dealings with pupils, parents and others are positive and productive, and I am sure that teachers recognise that, most of the time, they do not have a difficulty with the majority of people.

I look forward to working with all my colleagues in relation to the changes that we are bringing about. Members will also know that I am funding the anti-bullying forum.

I will finish by reiterating one point. We need to build a culture of respect and empowerment, and we can lead by example in the House. However, at times, Members do not lead by example. I have had a lot of experience of Members resorting to personal abuse, but it is time that we led by example. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Bhí díospóireacht ardchaighdeán againn inniu, agus tá áthas orm gur ghlac an oiread sin daoine páirt inti.

We have had a good debate today, and I am glad that so many Members had the opportunity to participate in it. The debate was largely conducted in the correct spirit, with one or two exceptions.

5.45 pm

It is regrettable that Mr Poots chose to party-politicise the debate; no other Member who spoke took that route. I am afraid that he is mistaken in his belief that assaults on teachers began when corporal punishment ended. There were assaults on teachers before corporal punishment ended, and such assaults continued afterwards.

Let us face it — corporal punishment is itself a form of violence. Mr Poots sees corporal punishment as the solution to violent attacks, but the answer to violence is not more violence. Indeed, violence only generates further violence. I regret Mr Poots's view and his attack on our party for bringing the motion to the Floor

of the House. If he had been so concerned about the matter, he would have taken the trouble to table a motion, but he did not.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr D Bradley:** No; the Member will not give way. The Member asked Mr Poots to give way and he refused, so I am afraid that there will be no opportunity to make an intervention at this time.

I will continue by dealing with what the Minister said. It is important to evaluate her contribution early, because I have to deal with many speeches. I welcome the Minister's strong statement and her view that violence and assaults against teachers are totally unacceptable, and it is important that we make that clear. I also welcome her belief that teachers are among the most valuable assets in the education system and that we — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I must restore a sense of discipline; I ask Members to remain quiet while Mr Bradley concludes the debate.

**Mr D Bradley:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I assure you that those Members had not interrupted me in the least. However, I see that you are at pains to establish good discipline here, just as a teacher would in his or her classroom. It is unfortunate that you have to do that, but you do it very effectively.

I welcome the Minister's view that our teachers are among the best in Europe. She asked how we can best minimise the threat to teachers in the classroom, and, indeed, that is a key question. She is at pains to develop a culture of democracy in schools, but we need to know exactly what she means by a "culture of democracy". The rights of children must be fully respected, but there must be clear limits in schools and, indeed, in family life. As the Minister said, respect must be earned. A contract based on mutual respect should be at work between teachers and pupils in schools; it is when that contract breaks down that teachers are assaulted.

I was disappointed that the Minister was not prepared to endorse zero tolerance for assaults on and violence against teachers. Many Members spoke in favour of zero tolerance; I am not sure why the Minister is unsure about it, and I would like her to clarify that at some future stage. As Dr Deeny said, a zero-tolerance approach is taken to attacks on Health Service staff; therefore I do not see why there should not also be a zero-tolerance approach to attacks on the education workforce. Some children come to school with a great deal of baggage, but emotional and behavioural difficulties should never be used to excuse violent behaviour — verbal or physical — in any way.

The Minister says that schools should be encouraged to keep accurate records of violence

against teachers; however, we need to go further. The Department must insist that schools keep accurate records of such incidents. As many Members said, we need to have the most accurate and up-to-date information in order to build an accurate picture of what is going on and to act accordingly.

The Minister described what has been done to date. She also mentioned that the use of the Internet and mobile phones to bully and bring violence on people is being dealt with. I welcome that, too; as well as the fact that she is exploring the experiences of the Republic of Ireland, England and Wales. I was disappointed, though, that she did not commit any specified amount of resources to the problem. As we know, Ministers' commitment to particular issues is often measurable by the amount of resources that they are prepared to put to those issues. I would like the Minister to clarify in the near future the extent to which she will dedicate resources to this problem.

I will review some of the contributions made during the debate. I begin with what was said by Mr Ken Robinson. He will forgive me for singling him out, but I was struck by the insight that he brought to the problem of the suffering of teachers who are assaulted. He portrayed clearly the distress and the suffering endured by a teacher who was the victim of an assault. Although, importantly, he noted the support available from fellow members of staff, he indicated that, in some cases, principals and boards of governors did not always, for particular reasons, provide the level of support that teachers deserve in that difficult situation — a situation in which teachers find themselves through no fault of their own. I thank Mr Robinson for that insight. Obviously, his long experience as a teacher and principal is evident from his contribution.

Mr Storey, the Chairperson of the Education Committee, reminded us that the Committee had dealt with the INTO report to which I referred in my initial speech. He pointed out that the Committee recommended to the Department that the report be dealt with under the review proposed by the Minister into the education workforce. Unfortunately, that review has been delayed and Mr Storey called on the Minister to bring it forward and to incorporate in it the recommendations made by the INTO report.

John O'Dowd commented on the growth of attacks on primary-school teachers, and that was echoed by several other contributors, including Michelle McIlveen. Mr O'Dowd said that we need to understand why children between five and 11 years of age are involved in violent attacks on their teachers. He believed that it was due to a lack of parental control and an indication that something was wrong in the family and the home. He also said that services were needed to support those children and their families. He underlined the fact that teachers, too, needed support

and that accurate information should be collected about assaults on teachers, and relevant action taken.

Mr Basil McCrea saw a link between domestic violence and violence in schools. He said that a joined-up approach was needed by the Department. It was extremely difficult for teachers to teach when their safety and security were uncertain. He said that the Minister had, possibly, lost an opportunity to deal with this issue through the education and skills authority Bill. He said that help, advice and guidance should be available to teachers who were assaulted.

I could continue: there were many other useful contributions.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member please draw his remarks to a close?

**Mr D Bradley:** I think that it was a very worthwhile debate and I hope that the Minister will take into account the points that I have made in my winding up speech. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to debate this issue.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes the increasing reports of violence towards school principals and teachers; and calls on the Minister of Education to address this matter urgently, by establishing a joint working party with the recognised teachers' unions, statutory agencies and other stakeholders, to ensure that uniform recording and reporting mechanisms are in place for all schools, that a training and awareness programme is developed for all teachers, and that principals and governors are provided with appropriate advice and guidance on dealing with violence against staff in schools.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### The Hope Centre, Ballymena

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

If Members have private business to conduct, please do it outside the Chamber and allow other Members the opportunity to be heard.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** As has been the practice today, I wish to express and add my sympathy to the family of Constable Carroll following his brutal and callous murder. Our sympathy and prayerful support goes to his wife and family at this time. I am sure that the House will join with me in welcoming the fact that one person has already been arrested, and we hope that others are made amenable to the law in the days, weeks and months ahead.

The Hope Centre in Ballymena is a voluntary community alcohol- and drug-addiction project located in the town centre. It serves adults, children and the families of those affected by addiction — directly or indirectly — across the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. As Members know, that is one of the largest board areas in the country. The Hope Centre provides a vital service within the community and is the only one of its kind, not just in Ballymena, but in County Antrim and, indeed, in Northern Ireland. I tabled the topic for debate to draw attention to the fact that such a vital local service in a constituency that has needs in the area of addiction — and which serves the rest of the country — is on the brink of a major funding crisis.

The Hope Centre treats and supports over 400 clients. Clients are mainly from the Ballymena area, but come from as far away as Cookstown, Portstewart, Newtownabbey and the city of Belfast. Clients are referred to the Hope Centre from a variety of sources. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Court Service, numerous GP practices, and the Northern Ireland Community Addiction Service all regularly refer people to the Hope Centre. That speaks testament to the fact that the Hope Centre provides a very useful and valued service across the community.

Not only does the Hope Centre help the individual who has an addiction, it assists the entire family circle; that can be the user's children, parents, partners or

siblings. Since 2000, the Hope Centre has been addressing the issue of hidden harm. Addiction is well documented across the community and we know of many people in the news who suffer from the devastating disease of addiction. Addiction not only affects the individual physically and psychologically, but it affects the family circle and the community from which that individual comes. Addiction impacts on social deprivation, crime and antisocial behaviour — all of which can flow from such problems.

Almost all of us know someone who has a problem with alcohol or drug addiction. The Hope Centre has over 219 clients — well over 50% of its client base — registered through the alcohol addiction programme. The Hope Centre works with the sickest of the sick. It works with those who have nowhere else to turn, who are without hope and who need to be given hope. It deals with people of all age groups. One of its clients is a nine-year-old child who is addicted to smoking cannabis; at the other end of the spectrum is a 66-year-old man who has had a drink and alcohol abuse problem all his life.

The Hope Centre works with all sections of the community; all races, creeds and colours — it turns no one away. However, in April this year, the centre will be in the midst of a major crisis because funding to that service has been cut. It stands to lose four members of staff, leaving only three staff members to service what is a growing community. The centre would simply not be able to function and would have to face the possibility of closure. Amid the economic downturn and the looming depression, alcohol and drug problems are, in my opinion, only set to get worse. However, facilities such as the Hope Centre are about to disappear.

6.00 pm

We have a moral responsibility to address the issue precisely and urgently. I ask the House to give the Hope Centre the hope that it requires to maintain a vital service in the community. It is part funded by the Northern Drugs and Alcohol Co-Ordination Team, but that funding will run out at the end of March, with the loss of a further two posts and a substantial portion of its rent. Without that assistance and help, the Hope Centre would be faced with closure.

What actual nuts-and-bolts service does the Hope Centre provide? I shall use the word “hope” as an acrostic in order to spell out the answer to that.

“H” is for the help that it provides to people who are most in need. As I said, the sickest of the sick use the facility. It is used by people on whom society has turned its back and by people who have turned their backs on society. It helps people who are regarded as down-and-outs and who are regarded as being beyond help. The centre provides help to the people who are in most need.

“O” is for the opportunity that the centre gives by way of services. It provides therapy, counselling, physical training, IT training, one-to-one support, family support and helps people with craft development. It helps people to build confidence so that they can go out and seek employment and seek to rebuild their lives. It provides the opportunity for character building and of helping people with their money-management problems. It provides alcohol and drug education and helps people by providing relapse prevention courses, recovery planning and help with stress and anger management as a result of the problems that they face because they are in the downward spiral of an addiction crisis. Without the Hope Centre, that opportunity would be lost.

“P” stands for the fact that family support is put at the heart of the Hope Centre. When people have an addiction problem, whether that is through alcohol or drug abuse, it does not affect them as an island but it affects the entire family unit. They may end up stealing from their family and may drive their family towards depression. They may hurt their family as well as hurting themselves.

The Hope Centre not only provides help and opportunity to the person who suffers from addiction but it provides the same help and opportunity to the entire family group, letting the family know that they are not alone with the problem. It builds the family’s support network and helps the family to experience sharing the problem in order to learn about how to deal with a person with substance abuse and to put things out of harm’s way for the substance abuser. I believe that that family support network is one of the secrets as to why the Hope Centre has been regarded as such a success for the past nine years and explains why people flock to it in the numbers that they do.

Finally, “E” stands for the experience that the Hope Centre delivers. The people who work in the Hope Centre have experience of dealing with those with addiction problems not only on a professional basis but they have the experience of going through that with either a family member or a friend. They know exactly what it means for the individual, and that personal experience by the volunteers who work for the Hope Centre is absolutely crucial in demonstrating that it provides something vital, crucial and unique to society. We should be loath to throw that away so easily because it needs a few thousand pounds.

The financial crisis that looms for the Hope Centre is, on the scale of things, not massive. However, if it does not get the resources that it requires, the consequences will be massive, not only for the community in my constituency but for the entire Northern Trust area. I am concerned that, so far, the ministerial response to the matter has been woefully inadequate. A partnership

approach from Ministers is important, and a co-ordinated approach by them is also important.

I wrote to the Minister for Social Development and, indeed, to the Health Minister. I also contacted the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Social Development Minister recognised in her letter to me dated 18 February 2009:

“The valuable support services that are provided in the Centre to those affected by drugs and alcohol abuse are to be commended”,

However, I was disappointed that she went on to say:

“This project funding will end in March and there are no further funding streams available to support the work of the Centre”.

She recommended that I contact the Department of Health. Unfortunately, I got a similar response from that Department. Although concerned about the centre’s work, it said:

“On this occasion, the Hope Centre was unsuccessful in gaining the contract to provide Community Support services in relation to substance misuse across the Northern Board area.”

I stress that small organisations, such as the Hope Centre, do not necessarily have the skills to put in place long-term tendering bids and projects. The 14 tenders that have been granted by the Northern Health and Social Services Board have been won by people who are professional when it comes to putting together tender bids. Do they, however, have the expertise or nous on the ground to deal with the individuals who approach them? My concern is that the skills and experience to deal with those who have problems with substance and alcohol abuse will be lost because of the need to acquire a few thousand pounds.

I am delighted that junior Minister Donaldson is present to respond to the debate. I encourage the Health Department and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to see whether there is some way in which additional support can be given to develop the centre’s family services or some aspect of its work so that funding can be made available. Will the junior Minister urge the Department of Health to seek a meeting with the centre and to put in place a discussion that will hand-hold it through a process that will, hopefully, lead to a successful bid and application for additional funding?

Urgent action is needed this month to keep the centre going. I hope that that urgent action will be followed up by a sustained and sustaining plan that will allow the Hope Centre to continue to do what it does best — give hope to people who are in dire straits; give help; give opportunity; put people first; and give of its experience.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing this issue to the House and, indeed, congratulate him on beating me to it. That is, however, a good thing: it shows that all of North Antrim’s MLAs are keen to speak on the

issue and to do as much as they can for the Hope Centre. As the Member has already explained, much more could be done by certain Executive Ministers.

In front of me, I have a copy of a letter that I sent to the Health Minister on 7 January 2008 to request an urgent meeting with him to discuss the immediate crisis facing the Hope Centre in Ballymena. Unfortunately, the Minister did not feel that the matter was urgent enough to necessitate that meeting. Indeed, he is not present today. Members could be forgiven for thinking that the Minister is running away from the issue. He needs to face up to his responsibilities on the matter, which is a pressing issue not only for people in our constituency of North Antrim, but for people much further afield.

The Hope Centre is a proactive organisation. Indeed, the family and relatives group that is based there has done a lot of good work in the Ballymena area during the past number of years. In February, some of the area's other MLAs and I attended a series of presentations in a hotel in Ballymena that demonstrated the impact that drugs have not only on the individual user, but on his or her immediate family and friends. If one thinks about the impact that drugs have on the user or addict, and multiplies that by five, 10, 20, or even 30, that gives an idea of the impact on an entire community.

One individual who spoke that day was a grandfather whose son had become a drug addict. His account was powerful, as he spoke of how his son, and his son's girlfriend, became addicted to drugs. After that powerful account, he outlined the emotional and financial problems that he and his wife face in looking after their grandchild. That example demonstrates the effect that drugs can have on an entire family.

The Hope Centre is a unique community and voluntary treatment and rehabilitation centre. It is the only such centre in Ireland, and as Mr Paisley Jnr said, it deals with addicts as young as nine and as old as 66. It is frightening to think that people as young as nine are becoming addicted to substances and that people as old as 66 are struggling to escape them. Community workers in the area have made it clear that the problem is entering third and fourth generations.

Earlier today, I spoke to workers from the centre, who have been informed that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust will not fund the centre for the next two years. The Health Minister should at least ensure that the managerial post — the key post at the centre — is retained in order to ensure that the structure that holds the centre together remains in place while other funding avenues are explored. The fact that local groups, such as churches, are collecting money to help the centre demonstrates how greatly the centre and its work are respected.

The Health Minister cannot sit idly by while the service goes to the wall, which will happen if funding is not secured within the next few weeks. Drugs users need help to wean themselves off substances such as heroin; without the centre, they will be left on the street. As one worker pointed out, the economy is entering a recession, and drug addiction and its associated problems, such as antisocial behaviour and petty crime, will worsen. Given that fact, rather than allow the centre to close, the Health Minister should provide extra finance to the centre and to other services across the North.

Other Departments have responsibilities in the matter, and given the number of referrals that the centre receives from the criminal justice system, the NIO should provide funding. I urge the junior Minister to consider that fact and to speak not only to individual Ministers but to the NIO, because it is important to adopt a co-ordinated approach to ensure that the buck is not passed from one Minister to another.

The misuse of drugs is a major issue in North Antrim; it has destroyed houses, homes and communities — and continues to do so. We need to adopt a united, direct approach to deal with the problem. Some people say that Ballymena does not have such a bad drugs problem; they do not want people to talk about it because it might affect the town's image and business prospects. However, Sinn Féin believes that rehab workers, community workers and families of addicts have a much better insight into the drugs problems. That is why we listen primarily to those who believe that the area has a major drugs problem and that putting our heads in the sand will only make it worse.

Many addicts who use the Hope Centre make the same remarks about their experience, but in different words. One former addict said but for the Hope Centre, he would not be here. If the centre is allowed to close, people's lives will be put on the line, and it is time that people here woke up to that reality. Go raibh maith agat.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I join others in expressing my sympathy to the families that have been bereaved by the awful events of the past few days.

I apologise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to Members because I will leave immediately after my speech; I should have been at the Assembly Commission meeting 30 minutes ago.

I fully support all the comments of the Members who spoke previously.

I think that Mr Paisley laid the situation out very clearly. There is little more that could be added to what he said, except to say that that one centre perhaps does more than many others that are well financed. When one realises the extent to which people are being

helped, it is clear that it is not just the addicts, but their families and friends, who are being helped.

6.15 pm

The Hope Centre has been grown from experience. It is not something that was set up just to get Government funding and to then carry on with a management team, bringing in experts and getting more money. That is not the purpose of the Hope Centre. The experiences of those who have been through the awful depression of addiction and those of the people who have worked with them and their families in their homes have built the Hope Centre in Ballymena.

From that point of view, we should pay tribute today to the great work that has been done for families, children, relatives, and especially the addicts. There is a history of help to the Hope Centre in Ballymena. Such work is not something that has been going on since just last year or the year before; the people in the Hope Centre in Ballymena have been helping others for many years, sometimes at their own expense. They have been giving their own time and whatever assistance that they can because they care for those who cannot help themselves.

It is not just the work that the centre does on drugs that we need to look at; we must look particularly at its work on alcoholism. In the Ballymena area, there has been a history of alcoholism that goes back a long way. That history shows that in that area, one could get poteen very easily, and in that particular mid-Antrim region, it was not favourable to popularise alcoholism — it was kept under the surface. Sometimes people — especially women — did not know where to go when they needed help, but when the Hope Centre came, they had a chance. They were given an opportunity and were helped in a way that gave them the confidence to try to overcome their problem.

When one realises how many people have been referred to the Hope Centre in Ballymena by the courts, the police, and different organisations, one begins to realise the importance of the Hope Centre, not just to mid-Antrim, but to the whole of Northern Ireland. As has been said, people come from quite a distance to go to the centre, and it is because of the ethos, the atmosphere and the honesty of help and hope that is given there that they can go to it with confidence and be treated.

Ballymena, mid-Antrim and Northern Ireland need the Hope Centre. Although we have tried to speak to the Health Minister and others, at this moment in time, the dark cloud of closure hangs over the centre. Can we not today appeal to the Executive to somehow or other give enough money to the centre to keep it open so that in the days to come, many others will be helped?

I thank Mr Paisley for bringing the issue to our attention this evening, and I trust that, together, we will succeed.

**Mr O'Loan:** I also thank and congratulate Mr Paisley Jnr for securing this Adjournment debate, and I likewise thank and congratulate Dr Coulter for organising and sponsoring an event recently at the Assembly on behalf of the Hope Centre. I regret, however, that I was not able to attend that event.

I will try not to be repetitive. Like others, I am very aware of the work of the Hope Centre, and I am very high in my praise of it.

It has created meaningful programmes and delivers them well. The Hope Centre staff work with the whole family, not only with the individuals who are recovering from addiction. At present, the funding for three or four staff at the centre — most importantly, for the manager — is about to run out, and that presents a very serious situation. Although funding is to continue for three staff, it will not be available if key staff, including the manager, are not in place.

Ballymena has a particular problem with drugs, including hard drugs such as cocaine and heroin. At least two recent deaths in the area have been directly associated with drugs, so the situation is one that we must all take seriously. We all agree on that. Referrals by key statutory agencies to the Hope Centre have been mentioned. Only recently, I attended a meeting at which senior police officers said that they had done exactly that, and they expressed their appreciation of the work that the centre does. The centre is very well run — if it were not, we would know about it. Working in such a difficult environment is not an easy thing, and the staff and the management do their job very well. I understand that the Hope Centre failed in one recent critical funding bid, but I believe that one funding bid is still live, although I am not absolutely certain of that.

I do not wish to be controversial for the sake of it, but I will comment somewhat critically on a few of the remarks that two Members made during the debate. Mr Paisley Jnr said that the sum of money that was being looked at was not a small sum. Of course, the money that is required to run a centre with seven or eight staff, associated buildings and substantial programmes runs into many thousands of pounds. In the context of the Northern Ireland Budget as a whole, it is not a large sum of money. Nevertheless, that money does not come out of the main Northern Ireland Budget but out of some section of some Department's budget. When looked at in that light, it is by no means an insignificant sum. Budget managers have difficult choices to make when critical decisions on such matters must be made, and there is no point in blinking at that fact. Hard realities must be faced, but those

decisions are not easy for budget managers and those who deliver services.

Likewise, when Daithí McKay criticised the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for what he saw as a failure to respond properly, he trivialised the situation. It is fatuous to portray the Minister as being a heartless wretch who simply will not do what he so easily could for those poor drug victims and their families in Ballymena. I am quite sure that Mr McGimpsey —

**Mr McKay:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Loan:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr McKay:** Will the Member confirm whether he is in the SDLP or the Ulster Unionist Party?

**Mr O'Loan:** In some ways, that makes my point. I dare say that if a Sinn Féin Minister of Health were to take the same decision as Minister McGimpsey, the same criticism would not be levelled at the former. It is pathetic for a Member to misrepresent the Minister's stance on the matter. If I felt that the position had some semblance of reality, I would support it. However, the Member has made a cheap jibe that does not help the Hope Centre, nor is it the sort of constructive contribution that North Antrim MLAs should be making in order to assist the Hope Centre.

Out of all this, I can offer only two possible constructive ways forward. As has been mentioned, there are people in the community who are very concerned about the fate of the Hope Centre. Those people are thinking of ways in which to raise money to help it. Those efforts are somewhat embryonic, even though a crisis is imminent, with funding running out at the end of this month.

It would be useful if some extension to the funding for the Hope Centre could be found in order to keep it operating for a short period. That would allow some of those initiatives to be tested to see whether they could come to something.

The fundamental question is whether the Hope Centre provides a service that is vital to health and social provision in Ballymena. If the centre were the subject of an independent evaluation — which I would be happy to see — and if it stood up to that test, the onus would be on the system to respond. I direct that particular point to the junior Minister.

If an element of our Executive system commissioned an evaluation of the work of the Hope Centre and found that it is a worthy enterprise but that it does not provide a unique and specialised service that is critical in its overall contribution, we should accept that. However, if such an evaluation said otherwise, we should respond to that. It would be a useful step if the Minister were to allow time for that to happen by granting

some extension of the funding and by commissioning an independent evaluation.

**Mr Storey:** Mr McKay and Mr O'Loan could do with some therapy; it might have been useful when they were having that bit of a spat, and it could have brought some harmony to them.

First, I commend my colleague Ian Paisley Jnr for bringing this issue to the House. It is an important issue; unfortunately, however, topics for Adjournment debates generate interest from only the Members that represent the constituency that is concerned. However, the impact of this debate will have repercussions beyond the bounds of North Antrim. We are discussing the Hope Centre today, but tomorrow we may discuss some other centre or facility that offers services that are similar to those of the Hope Centre.

As other Members stated, anyone who takes the time to acquaint himself or herself with the work of the Hope Centre cannot not fail to be impressed greatly by the work that it does and by the services that it provides. Tackling the problem of alcohol and drug misuse and how those can harm individuals, families and even entire communities, is a priority.

In recent days in Ballymena we have seen the sad consequences of another young life destroyed and brought to an end as a result of drugs misuse. When the Hope Centre was established in 2000 by a group of concerned parents who came together to offer support, information and advice to anyone affected by drug misuse, it made a real difference to many people's lives.

Although the work of the Hope Centre is difficult and challenging for those who are engaged in it, the volunteers, who draw on their own experiences, are able to provide the kind of advice and insight that simply cannot be taught or learned. They have been through the school of experience, and they have used that knowledge wisely and in a way that has been beneficial to those who use the centre. Their understanding and experience far outstrips that which could be learned by mere theory.

Since it was established, the Hope Centre has provided that kind of help to the many hundreds of people who have been impacted by drug and alcohol misuse, and it has helped many of their families through difficult circumstances.

The honourable Member referred to the need to not trivialise this issue; we need to ensure that we do not do that.

6.30 pm

It is ironic that the Minister for Social Development, when she visited the Hope Centre in June 2008, presented volunteers with a certificate and a candle that bore the motto of the Hope Centre. We should remind ourselves

of that motto — keeping the light of hope alive. It is very sad that, in regard to the service that the Hope Centre provides, the light is not only flickering, but it is ready to be extinguished. In her description of the facility, the Minister said:

“Volunteers have a profound effect on those around them: their generosity can offer a lifeline to the most vulnerable; their commitment can bring communities together; and, their example can be an inspiration to us all.

Volunteering changes lives. It can build bridges and can empower individuals and communities to tackle the issues that are important to them.”

She added:

“I have no doubt that the Hope Centre is making a real difference to the lives of people in Ballymena, and even further afield, through your outreach services.”

She then concluded:

“I want to thank you all for the good work. I know that the work you do to combat substance abuse is not easy. It is appropriate that we are here at the Hope Centre today as your work to combat substance abuse has brought hope to so many people.”

We can give the Hope Centre all the praise and all the platitudes, but we need to ensure that it has the resources necessary to carry on its work. The last thing that people in the Hope Centre needs is more tea and sympathy. Instead, it needs the appropriate and adequate resources.

The Hope Centre was delighted to receive a visit from the former First Minister and local MP, Dr Paisley. On that occasion in April 2008, Dr Paisley said that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety’s new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol would have a platform and strategy for cross-sectoral and cross-Government action to prevent and address substance misuse. That still needs to be the priority for the Executive and the Administration not only for the Hope Centre and those who benefit from its use, but for general society in Northern Ireland.

I hope that the unanimous call that has been made here, led by my colleague Ian Paisley Jnr, will be heeded and that junior Minister Donaldson will convey our comments to the appropriate Ministers and those who are able to take a decision. Hopefully that will ensure that that light of hope in Ballymena is maintained and continues to provide a lifeline for those in need. That service is invaluable, and it is something that we cannot do without. I support the motion.

**The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson):** I thank the Member for North Antrim Ian Paisley Jnr for bringing forward such an important issue for discussion. I also acknowledge the unanimity with which other Members for North Antrim have spoken.

Substance abuse can blight the lives of not only individuals, but families and communities from across

Northern Ireland. That sentiment has been echoed by those Members who spoke in the debate. Both the Assembly and the Executive have acknowledged the seriousness of the problem and have committed, as a matter of urgency, to tackle not only the consequences of addiction and substance misuse, but the causes.

Addiction and substance misuse ruin lives. However, the impact of abusing drugs or alcohol does not end with the individual. Often, it can tear apart families and cause untold pain to parents, siblings, spouses and children.

Many sufferers and their families rely on centres such as the Hope Centre for essential support and help through those difficult times. Such organisations play a vital and valuable role in the community, and their hard work and commitment are to be commended.

The Hope Centre, in common with many organisations, depends on its volunteers to deliver the assistance and support that make a genuine difference to many people’s lives. The centre previously benefited from DSD’s decision to fund a three-year project to support volunteering.

In recognition of the value of volunteers, the Department for Social Development is developing a volunteering strategy for Northern Ireland. The strategy will aim to align activities throughout Government, the voluntary sector and other stakeholders to re-energise, and increase the levels of, volunteering.

Many key actions in the strategy fall to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and colleagues made particular mention of the Minister this evening. He asked me to state clearly that he is fully committed to delivering on the outcomes that are set out in the new cross-departmental strategic direction for alcohol and drugs. The strategy recognises that no one-size-fits-all approach can address the issue across Northern Ireland. Different issues, communities and people require different types of service and support.

Of the £6.5 million provided to DHSSPS for the implementation of the strategy in 2008-09, more than £5 million has been allocated to local projects, programmes, organisations and initiatives. That funding is in addition to the money made available through the Department’s mental-health services for the provision of dedicated alcohol and drug treatment services, which are available in a range of settings across Northern Ireland.

In addition, four drug and alcohol co-ordination teams were established in the health and social care board areas to work locally on the issue. It is the responsibility of each board and team to identify local needs relating to alcohol and drug misuse, and to ensure that services are in place to meet them.

In 2006, therefore, each team developed a local alcohol and drug action plan. To deliver on those action plans, the local teams tendered for organisations to provide the required services. The tendering process is used to ensure equality and transparency because more than one organisation is often capable of providing the service in each area.

I have been reliably informed that, during the initial tendering round in 2006, the Hope Centre successfully bid to provide community support services across the Northern Board area. However, that contract is due to expire in March 2009.

During 2008, each drug and alcohol co-ordination team reviewed its action plan to ensure that it continued to meet local need, deliver on the outcomes contained in the new strategic direction and provide value for money. After the review, a new tendering process was undertaken during the summer of 2008 for the delivery, beginning in April 2009, of the revised service specifications in the action plans.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety fully acknowledges the challenges that a tendering system poses to the voluntary and community sector. I understand that, after an assessment of the bids, the Hope Centre was, unfortunately, unsuccessful in its bid for the contract to provide community support services relating to substance misuse across the Northern Board area. The contract was awarded to a different provider.

The Northern board has confirmed to the Health Minister that the process undertaken has been robust and transparent and that all EU and UK regulations governing competitive tendering have been adhered to.

I assure Members that there has not been any reduction in the level of funding that is available from the Department of Health for alcohol and drugs services through the new strategic direction in the Northern board area or, indeed, across Northern Ireland.

Almost £5.2 million will be allocated in 2009-2010 to local action to prevent and address the harm related to alcohol and drugs misuse across Northern Ireland. The Northern board will receive around £1.25 million of that budget. In addition, the board has assured the Health Minister that no funded services to support people who misuse substances have been lost or discontinued. The Department of Health has also recently launched an integrated hidden harm action plan under the new strategy, which seeks to identify the needs of children and young people who have been born to, or are living with, substance misusing parents or carers.

The Hope Centre has not been successful in its bid for community support services, and I understand that the Northern board is in discussions with the Hope Centre about the opportunity to extend its family support programme for another year in order to support the work being undertaken on the hidden harm action plan.

There is the possibility of some funding being made available under that programme to enable the Hope Centre to continue that work, and discussions are ongoing.

I am happy to convey to the Health Minister the request made by Ian Paisley Jnr, and reiterated by other Members, for a meeting to discuss the way forward. I assure the Chamber that the Executive are fully committed to tackling this issue head on.

I jointly chair, with the other junior Minister, the ministerial subcommittee that is looking at the issue of vulnerable young people and children. Substance abuse, alcohol abuse, suicide risk and so on are areas that we are considering. We will seek to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach on the issue across all Departments, as Mr Paisley Jnr said earlier. There is that need for co-ordination.

I am sure that Members agree that the only transparent, equitable and fair way to allocate limited resources is to allow all local organisations to tender for the provision of services at a local level. Unfortunately, it means that, from time to time, some good organisations miss out on those tendering processes. That is no reflection on the excellent work that the Hope Centre has undertaken in the past, and I hope, will continue to be able to undertake in the future. As a Minister, I am happy to work with MLAs from the area to see what can be done to ensure that that work continues.

I will convey their concerns to the appropriate Ministers.

*Adjourned at 6.44 pm.*



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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 16 March 2009

*The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Enhancement of Debt Advisory Services

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who 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 McLaughlin:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increasing amount of personal debt and the crisis facing many mortgage holders; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a package of measures to enhance existing debt-advisory services, and to provide additional resources and training for community based organisations providing debt counselling.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion is timely. The Assembly has indicated its willingness to provide support, and I welcome the initiatives that Ministers have announced. The matter before us is to consider how to continue to support what the two Ministers are doing. Furthermore, we must explore how we might enhance and develop that support, particularly in circumstances in which the economic decline is having more and more impact.

Unfortunately, motions can sometimes be perceived as being mischievous, or designed to embarrass or criticise Ministers. Therefore, I make it clear from the outset that there is no intention other than to recognise what is being done and to call for additional measures to be introduced as the situation worsens.

I am sure that all Members are indebted to the Research and Library Service, which provides an excellent backup facility to MLAs. The documentation

that it produced for this debate sets out in stark detail the statistics of spiralling debt and information on how many families are being confronted with the consequences of enforcement proceedings. The statistics support our concern that that is an ever-escalating problem.

I welcome the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's presence in the Chamber. Ministers are operating in circumstances in which they do not have unlimited resources, and in which problems can emerge that could not be foreseen when budgets were being allocated and bids developed. That, in turn, puts pressure on the commitments that were given in the Programme for Government. However, the enhancement of debt advisory services is a cross-cutting issue. The lead Minister, who is in the Chamber, and other Ministers — particularly the Minister for Social Development, who has provided invaluable support to the voluntary and community sector — must become involved and help to address the matter.

Ministers will come to the House to inform Members how they intend to release resources. Their announcements will often have an impact on the commitments in the Programme for Government. In such instances, those Ministers — whoever they are — should be entitled to the House's understanding.

I am sure that every MLA can provide evidence that, owing to debt problems, more and more people are coming to their constituency clinics in desperation. Some people are threatened by the significant amounts of personal debt that they have accrued. It is not so long since finance was practically being offered to individuals on their doorsteps. Furthermore, when they crossed the threshold of some of the financial institutions, people were being encouraged to take on more debt. There may have been a time when people felt that they could continue to exploit and develop such situations.

The reality was otherwise, however, as has been cruelly exposed. Many ordinary people with no background in financial management, other than managing domestic budgets and income, find themselves in over their heads and in circumstances in which they might forfeit, or be concerned about the prospect of having to forfeit, the family home. One can only imagine the trauma, pressure and stress that that brings. I am not arguing that debt can simply be wished away, but we must recognise that many individuals who find themselves in such circumstances have no sense of how to cope.

Practical steps can be taken to alleviate some of those pressures and reassure individuals. There are some initiatives out there that the financial institutions could and should introduce. I welcome the moves that the Ulster Bank has announced recently. It has made

available a significant sum of money to enhance advisory support to clients who wish to avail themselves of the bank's services. All financial institutions should be considering ways in which they can work with the political institutions.

I became aware of the SDLP amendment only this morning. I have looked carefully at that amendment but I cannot support it because I do not think that it improves the motion; in fact, it disimproves the motion in a particular way. In my view, no individual Minister should carry the load with respect to the issue of debt.

Reference to the Minister for Social Development has been omitted in the SDLP amendment. I can understand the desire of SDLP Members to show solidarity with their Minister, however, the motion is not criticising their Minister. It is simply referring to the fact that the portfolio of the Minister for Social Development involves a significant interface with the community and voluntary sector and that, therefore, there is a very substantial onus on her to support the work of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

That is of considerable importance, not simply in relation to the practical day-to-day working relationships between Ministers, but in sending out a signal to the wider community that we have joined-up Government and that Ministers voluntarily recognise and accept that they can each make a contribution to supporting the Assembly's overall response to an issue. That is the spirit in which the motion has been tabled. I hope that, even at this stage, the SDLP will consider their amendment in that context.

I recognise that the amendment has been accepted by the Speaker as a legitimate amendment, but I do not think that, as a statement from this Assembly, it exhorts and encourages Ministers to work to support one another, nor does it recognise the benefits of their doing that. It is not a matter of narrowing the issue and pointing the finger at another Minister; it is a matter of getting behind the efforts of individual Ministers to work together to bring forward a holistic package. Although we must recognise that we are dealing with broad economic circumstances about which this regional Assembly can do very little, we nonetheless have control of, and authority over, public policy, and we have the ability to be creative, imaginative and co-operative in bringing forward a response.

The interface that the community and voluntary sector in particular is providing — that is, by working alongside departmental officials and financial professionals — is the way that we can maximise our ability to impact on the huge emerging issue of personal debt, which threatens people's livelihoods, well-being and, from time to time, their family home. I ask the Assembly to support the motion, and I ask those who are proposing the amendment to consider

the issue in the context of a co-operative approach being taken, with Ministers supporting one other. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr A Maginness:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "holders;" and insert

"supports the announcements of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to double the funding, over the next two years, for free debt-advice provision; and calls on the Minister to expedite the tendering process and award contracts, as a matter of urgency, to relevant organisations delivering these crucial services."

I take on board what Mr McLaughlin has just said, and we will monitor the course of the debate to see whether it lives up to the generous spirit that he has just expressed in relation to the way in which the matter should proceed. However, we maintain that the motion, as amended, will be much more focused, and that, rather than damaging the essence of the motion, the amendment is a perfection of it.

Everyone in the House recognises that debt is an increasing problem that is being experienced by ordinary people, particularly during this time of economic crisis. The question is how we, as an Executive, use our resources in the best possible way to remedy the situation. In relation to this particular problem, we believe that we have to make the best use of the organisations that exist — in particular, the advice services given by Advice Northern Ireland and Citizens Advice, as well as other organisations that are operating on a voluntary basis. The SDLP supports that position, and I believe that other parties are equally supportive.

12.15 pm

The Minister improved the situation significantly by announcing in April 2008 that there would be increased funding of £400,000 to the organisations that I referred to, and in July 2008, she enhanced that funding to £800,000. That again was a significant increase, which the SDLP welcomed. However, the problem is that that additional funding has not yet been implemented because the tendering process has not been completed. We urge the Minister to expedite the tendering process and award contracts as a matter of urgency. Every Member agrees that the situation is urgent and that this is not a time for delay. We hope that the Minister and her Department will expedite the process and allow the contracts to be awarded as soon as possible. When I said that the amendment perfects Sinn Féin's motion, I did so on those grounds — this is a practical way to address an urgent problem.

Mr McLaughlin referred to other ministerial responsibilities, particularly those of the Minister for Social Development. Of course, the Minister for Social Development does not have direct responsibility for debt advice counselling. However, through her other responsibilities, she has tried to ameliorate the

situation affecting people in the community by, for example, issuing fuel poverty payments. It is hoped that 150,000 households will receive £150 towards household fuel payments, which will amount to £22·5 million. The Department is confident that payments can be made in April this year.

More significantly, the Department for Social Development is committed to continuing the Social Security Agency's (SSA) benefit uptake strategy. That is done not just by the Department and the agency, but in association with voluntary organisations in the community. The 2008-09 programme focuses on older people, on those with disabilities, and on families — including lone parents — and approximately 115,000 clients will be contacted, which is a significant segment of the population. The Social Security Agency reviews awards to benefit continually in order to ensure that the correct amount is being paid. Since April 2008, over 5,000 reviews have resulted in £12·8 million of extra benefit being paid to customers.

Significant strides are being made outside of the face-to-face debt counselling, which is the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The Department for Social Development (DSD) is doing its fair share with regard to trying to ameliorate the situation for people who find themselves in difficulty and keep them out of a debt situation.

I accept Mr McLaughlin's proposition that this issue is a responsibility for all Departments and for the Executive collectively. I appreciate the manner in which he made that point. However, there are organisations in Advice NI membership that are being forced to consider reducing their service provision. That is alarming and it ought to be addressed. Some organisations have had to issue staff protective redundancy notices as funding contracts are coming to an end without any indication that they will be renewed. In my own constituency of North Belfast, six specialist posts — including one money advice post — in the North Belfast Advice Partnership could be lost at the end of March 2009. That is a particular problem that faces people working at the coalface who are trying to deal with difficult situations on the ground.

Advice NI believes that further funding and support for money advice services is needed to address the problem of consumer debt. That is supported by findings from a 2003 report from the University of Bristol's Personal Finance Research Centre, which indicated that, at the time of research, there were around 12,500 people in Northern Ireland who had multiple debt problems and could benefit from money advice. That situation, of course, has worsened given the present critical economic circumstances.

Although one considers the DETI funding announcements to be valuable, Advice NI believes that that level

of investment is still not sufficient to address fully the current level of unmet need for money advice services. Advice NI has called for a commitment to tackling debt similar to that provided in Britain and the Republic, which is a money advice budgeting service. That could include a more holistic plan that considers preventative and action-based approaches to deal with debt advice in Northern Ireland.

I will conclude there, but I urge the proposer of the motion, in his usual generosity of spirit, to consider further the amendment to determine whether we can reach some consensus on this issue.

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

**Mr A Maginness:** I welcome the conciliatory way in which he approached the matter.

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

**Mr Newton:** It is correct to say that the Assembly has a good track record in addressing this problem, which stretches right across all sectors of the community and all levels of society. There is concern among all Ministers in seeking to address this issue.

I agree that the matter is not the responsibility of one Minister; it crosses the boundaries of all Departments. The Minister of Education even has a responsibility in this matter with regard to the area of early-days education about money management and financial management in primary schools. I imagine that all MLAs, MPs and even councillors are faced with this issue and are being contacted by constituents.

I want to mention two constituency problems that concerned me recently. First, I was contacted by a family from a large housing estate in East Belfast. I happened to go to see them on a Friday evening, and when I knocked the door, it was answered by two children who were about eight or nine years old. When I asked whether mummy was in, I was told that no, mummy was not in. When I asked whether daddy was in, I was told that no, daddy was not in. I was halfway back down the path when I heard "hello, hello, hello" from behind me. It turned out that I had been told that mummy and daddy were not in because the family thought that I was the tick man, the debt collector, calling on a Friday evening. That is the truth of the matter.

I went inside the house to talk the family about the broken window about which they had contacted me. They could not afford to replace the window and wanted the Housing Executive to repair it. However, the house contained all the very latest in home entertainment equipment. That illustrates why there is a need for education in how to manage finances.

The other problem was brought to me by a young man who called into my office. He was self-employed, having established his own landscape gardening business. He had bought his family home and was

paying his mortgage. However, he suffered an injury at work, and, unfortunately, he had reached a stage where he could not work and on doctor's advice, could not go back to his work. He had received a letter from the building society, indicating that it intended to start repossession proceedings. Those are two examples of problems that constituents face, and I am sure that all MLAs have similar stories.

In my experience, when debt becomes a problem, it does not affect only one person. Usually, a wife, husband, partner or, indeed, children are caught up in it. There is not necessarily, and not often, only one source of debt supply — it involves credit cards, store cards, housing arrears and mortgage arrears. The problem goes right across the board, and once someone gets into that spiral of debt, it is extremely difficult to get out of it. That is why I say that it is not the responsibility of one Minister to address the issue — it permeates all Departments.

People need to be made aware of unscrupulous moneylenders who drive debt up and up. Indeed, I include in that the companies that use highly sophisticated television advertising that promises to consolidate your debt and take away all your worries. One is the doorstep lender, the other is the highly sophisticated approach — neither should be encouraged. We must support the professional advice services, citizens advice bureaux and the independent advice centres. I was pleased to note that even the Ulster Bank has indicated that it is willing, through Minister Foster, of whose statement I am aware, to provide free advice to people. That is to be welcomed.

**Mr Cree:** I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in today's debate. Although the current economic recession is being experienced on a global scale, we must remember that it affects us all at a local level, too. It is easy to lay all the blame at the feet of the large banks and American corporations, but that does not help Northern Ireland out of its current situation. We should not sit back and hope that people in Northern Ireland will not be severely affected, because they will. We are part of a global community that is going through the most difficult economic crisis for decades; therefore Northern Ireland should be doing all that it can to provide financial assistance to its citizens.

I agree with the sentiments of the motion, which proposes that the Executive bring forward a package of measures to enhance existing debt-advisory services. However, we must remember that the Executive will not be able to end the economic crisis, but merely alleviate some of its effects.

Therefore, I commend initiatives such as Citizens Advice and Advice NI. Those organisations provide a valuable service, but in a climate such as this, they are

under tremendous pressure as people look to them for financial and, often, emotional assistance.

Advice NI made a number of recommendations in its annual report. Those included a number of calls for extra funding in order to enable advisers to deal with the extra pressures that they are being put under. Indeed, the demand for debt and financial advice is greater than ever before.

*12.30 pm*

The number of home repossessions is increasing at an alarming rate, but we must remember that behind every statistic, there is a human being and, very likely, a family that needs to be provided for. Although it is clear that we are in a huge economic predicament, Northern Ireland also faces many human tragedies. Therefore, the services that debt advice agencies provide are now even more imperative. Those services provide a vital lifeline for people who find themselves in difficulty, whether they are in debt, unemployed or facing the threat of losing their homes.

The economic crisis is crossing all geographical areas, industries and social groups. Advice NI deals with 200,000 enquiries a year, and that figure is likely to rise substantially this year. Therefore, we should be making extra resources available to deal with that increased workload. Unemployment is rocketing, and the total number of benefit claimants will rise sharply as a consequence. However, debt advice agencies are being asked to provide the same level of services with the same restricted resources as they had previously. In fact, staffing levels in some of the agencies have decreased by 4% over the past year.

I agree with the sentiment of the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party will support the amendment, because it is clearly more focused. I am sure that the Minister for Social Development and the other Ministers will liaise to find solutions in this very difficult period.

**Mr Neeson:** I must say at the outset that I hope that there will be no division in the House on this issue. I can support both the motion and the SDLP amendment.

This is too serious an issue for division, and I speak from personal experience. I was on unemployment benefit for a considerable time following the fall of the Assembly in 1982. I know the problems of trying to pay a mortgage. I know about dreading the postman coming to the door every day with bills and final demands. It is a serious issue, and I sympathise with people who have been caught up in the difficult economic downturn.

I remind Members about the role of the banks in this issue. We, the public, have bailed out those banks. It is important that the banks act responsibly towards their customers, who are facing genuine difficulties. This is an issue on which the Assembly should be focusing. I

agree with other Members that it is not an issue for only one Minister; we must act collectively to deal with it. It is easy to talk about a broad package of measures, but it is much harder to come up with specific actions that the House can advocate.

I will bring forward some such measures. Realistically, we cannot change benefits directly. However, we can do more work to ensure benefit uptake and, therefore, relieve the debt burden in some households. We can link debt service to social security queries more readily. We can build face-to-face advice into existing schemes, such as the mortgage rescue and the warm homes schemes.

I will digress for a moment to speak about the warm homes scheme. Believe it or not, the revision of this scheme is causing unemployment for some of the local enterprise agencies in Northern Ireland. That is not the responsibility of the Enterprise Minister — and I have spoken to her about this. Many people working for local enterprise agencies will lose their jobs unless there is an urgent intervention by the Department for Social Development.

It is noticeable that most of the recommendations made in the debate and in public discourse relate to benefits. However, the fundamental challenge in this is for working families — most likely not entitled to any benefits — who face genuine challenges in paying bills for commodities and, often, in covering their mortgages. There is no point in linking debt advice to benefits when so many people who need it, and any other assistance, are not on benefits. Nor should we be attempting to persuade people onto benefits when they are working. Rather, we should build provision for rising household debt into almost every aspect of policy. With respect to energy, increasing competition among suppliers and ensuring easier access to renewable energy sources would help hugely with household budgets.

This is a major issue. Even in their constituency offices, Members face a growing problem of debt. It is not so long ago that banks were trying to persuade us, on a daily basis, to take out new credit cards. I can offer an example of the effect of that. Recently, I had someone in my constituency office who owed over £20,000 of credit-card debt, yet he was on benefits. We call on the various agencies to provide extra advice, but banks should behave responsibly.

**Mr Shannon:** I have every sympathy with this proposal. I hope that an accommodation between the motion and the amendment can be reached.

These are the facts. In Northern Ireland, the number of mortgages in arrears between July and September 2008 was almost double that at the same period of the previous year. A total of 1,006 writs and summonses were issued, compared to 521 in 2007. A total of 3,628 mortgage arrears notices were issued to people in

Northern Ireland in 2008, which is a rise of 64% on the previous year. There has been an increase of 300% in requests for debt advice. If those figures do not tell the story, nothing will.

An online search reveals homes offered in auctions at a fraction of their former cost. Big businesses and those with money are sweeping in and buying out homeowners. One homeowner in my constituency suffered a heart problem and was unable to continue working at her cleaning business. Income from her husband's job was insufficient to pay the mortgage and when someone knocked on the door offering to buy their home, there was no option but to sell. The problem was that the businessman who offered to buy her house offered £75,000 for her semi-detached home in Newtownards, which was under half of its value, even at today's reduced prices. The couple did not want to declare bankruptcy, and my constituent was forced to accept his offer, which covered the rest of the mortgage and little more. That tied them up for three months, unable to sell; however, the buyer declared that he did not want the property after all.

My constituent and her husband then found another young couple who were prepared to pay £110,000, which would have given her something with which to start her new home. However, the original buyer came back waving the initial contract, which gave him a three-month option to purchase, despite the fact that he had orally repudiated it. The couple had signed a document that they did not understand, and had not known that they could go anywhere for advice. The moral is clear: where there is no help, or where they are unaware that help is available, people will be taken advantage of.

That is just one example; there are many others. This is a story that has been repeated too many times. I am shocked to find that many homes in high rate-paying areas of Newtownards are up for auction at a fraction of their value. No matter how well-off people once were, they need help and advice to stop them from getting into a situation where there is no other option but to sell their homes at a fraction of their value.

Having learned of various situations like that in my constituency, I asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment several questions about debt advice in the Province and, in particular, my constituency. I got the following answer:

"The noo, mae Depairtment peys Citizen's Advice fer 12 debt advisors acroass Norlin Airlan fer the tim 2008-2011. A contract wus gien tae Citizen's Advice efter a public tender exercise where propoones wur leuked fer es tae hoo bes' tae meet demand an' gie a free face tae face service airted aa the maist disadvantaged pairts. Nane o' thae propoones leuked tae pit a debt adviser i Airds an' Strangford."

"My Department currently provides funding to Citizen's Advice for 12 debt advisers located across Northern Ireland for the period 2008-2011. A contract was awarded to Citizen's Advice following a public tender exercise where proposals were sought as to how best

to meet demand and provide a free face to face service aimed at the most disadvantaged areas. None of the proposals received sought to locate a debt adviser in the Ards and Strangford areas. My Department continues to provide ongoing advice and assistance to all advice centres in Northern Ireland through training, workshops and seminars on many aspects of dealing with debt."

The Minister also said:

"On 3 July 2008, I announced an extra £400,000 for the provision of free face to face debt advice across Northern Ireland for two years starting in April 2009. My Department will be carrying out a post project evaluation of the debt advice during 2006/07, in order to identify any gaps in provision. It is too early to say whether the extra funding will result in a debt adviser being located in the Ards and Strangford area at April 2009."

My hope is that there will be an adviser and that Leonard Bartlett, who presently deals with debt advice along with everything else, will be able to have some assistance in that matter.

As you can see from the answers that my colleague has given, her Department is active in trying to provide a much-needed service, and she should be commended for that. Last week, I spoke on the motion that asked the Department for Social Development to put in place, as a matter of urgency, a plan of action. I reiterate that call now. People need help now. They do not need another mission statement; they need action on the mission. Let us get down to business and do all that is in our power to help people through the dark times. By working together and by acting together we can and will pull through into a brighter Northern Ireland. At this time, however, there are a great many people in trouble. Let us do our best to help them.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as someone who worked in the advice sector from 1981 to 2007, a period of approximately 26 years. Therefore, I am very aware of the importance and impact that advice provision has, and will continue to have, for the wider public. The provision of advice has always been fraught with difficulty, in particular, debt advice, which is a very complex area. I remember attending a housing rights seminar a number of years ago at which debt advice was talked about. I was told that one case could take approximately six months from start to conclusion. It is a very complex, time-consuming and expensive area to deal with.

Over the years, the advice sector has gone from strength to strength in spite of a continual lack of resources and funding. Advice services, particularly in the voluntary sector, have become very professional in their approach to, and delivery of, the information and advice provided. Currently, advice and information services are provided by Government Departments and agencies on issues relevant to their role. Regional and voluntary organisations provide advice on specific issues such as welfare rights and, usually, that is focused on a particular group of clients. There are independent

advice services, many of which are primary advice providers, but some of which are involved in community development and provide advice as part of their work.

Over the years, one of the main problems has been the inconsistent approach to the funding of advice services, in particular, by local councils. For instance, I worked in the Newry Welfare Rights Centre, which did not receive any council funding for the first 16 years of its existence. It was only when the voluntary community unit provided matching funding that the council changed its approach and provided some funding. For many years, the main source of funding was the Southern Health and Social Services Trust, which, in fairness, recognised the importance of advice giving.

If adequate funding is provided, there is no doubt that advice services can go a long way to help people who get into debt to the extent that has happened more recently. Many advice services respond to need and to the availability of resources. Unfortunately, a lot of advice work is supported through short-term funding.

As has been said, the provision of advice in relation to social security benefits is very important. Often, many people who find themselves in debt and on benefits are not maximising their entitlement to benefits because of a lack of knowledge in that area, which can be complex and difficult to access.

12.45 pm

Pressure is undoubtedly growing on the resources that are available to fund advice services. Organisations are having to reduce services, and staff are losing their jobs as a result. The knowledge and experience that staff have gained over the years, particularly on debt advice, is often lost, and it is then difficult to replace.

A strategic approach to the funding of professional advice services is urgently needed, and the needs of the most disadvantaged people in society must be addressed. The provision of sustainable advice services will go a long way to helping to achieve that. Independent analysis of debt advice, which DETI funded, concluded that Citizens Advice was helping vulnerable people, and that is as it should be. Fifty per cent of people who accessed the debt advice service were on means-tested benefits, and services should reach those who are in greatest need.

The point has already been made that more than one Minister is responsible for debt advisory services, and DSD's role is inextricably linked to the provision of advice services. Under DSD's proposed mortgage-rescue scheme to assist people who have difficulty in meeting mortgage payments and who find themselves in arrears, people will have to contact an advice agency such as the Housing Rights Service, Citizens Advice and local independent centres in order for their eligibility for the scheme to be established.

However, DSD proposes only to seek funding to provide at least one additional post in a mortgage- and debt-advice organisation. I cannot see how the provision of one additional post will go any way to helping to solve the problem. DETI and DSD must recognise their responsibilities, and ensure that proper and sustainable advice provision is made before the problem spirals completely out of control. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Attwood:** The House is unanimous on the matter, and in response to Mr Neeson's comments, I do not anticipate there being a Division. However, I wish to make two substantive comments, one on the banks and the other on the acquisition of additional services.

Members have rightly made the point that in the current circumstances, banks have a responsibility to contribute to making credit available to clients again. However, the other part of that equation concerns how banks are managing their customer base, especially those customers who are faced with heightened debt and are at heightened risk. I say to the Minister that a further conversation is needed with the banks on that issue. The anecdotal evidence that I have heard may reflect a wider evidence base, which suggests that banks are doing a number of things to clients who may be in financial difficulties.

First, single employers — individual businessmen — are coming under pressure from banks to convert their business loans into personal loans. As the Minister will be aware, that means that the banks may be further able to put the squeeze on individual businessmen's debt burden. When people encounter such debt problems, it is inappropriate for banks to begin to do that, because their doing so makes individuals' financial circumstances even more difficult.

A second piece of anecdotal information that is beginning to emerge, for which there may also be a wider evidence base, is that some banks are closing people's accounts because they no longer want the business. There may also be a wider evidence base for that. People who lose their bank accounts in circumstances that are beyond their control are being placed in more difficult circumstances, over and above the debt burden, when their personal accounts are closed.

A conversation with the banks is needed, not only about their releasing more money to people in the North who are affected by the credit squeeze but about showing more flexibility in managing their client base. Accounts should not be closed unilaterally, and banks should not pressurise account holders to convert business debt into personal debt.

My second point, which relates to the SDLP's amendment, is that there is evidence in a sister Department of the Minister's that the tender process gets in the way of a Department being able to provide

a rapid response to the credit squeeze. I have been in correspondence — and the Minister may want to investigate the matter further — with the Minister for Employment and Learning about how Treasury guidelines on funding of third-sector organisations enable those organisations to be grant-aided rather than having to go through a tendering process necessarily.

In the current situation, there may be a way to grant-aid organisations in certain circumstances, in order to provide specialist support such as debt services in situations of need or stress, rather than their having to go through an elaborate tender process. The Minister for Employment and Learning has said that he does not believe that Treasury guidelines on funding of third-sector organisations for specialist advice-giving enables him to, for example, fund an organisation such as the Educational Guidance Service for Adults to help people who face redundancy and seek re-employment. My view differs from his.

However, if there is an issue in the Minister's Department or in any other Department about how to fund organisations that provide assistance during times of stress and need, such as those that exist at present, Departments and the Government have a responsibility to determine whether the Treasury's guidelines enable them to respond more quickly than they have thus far.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch):** I speak on behalf of the Committee for Social Development. The motion refers to, among other matters, enhancement in mortgage-advice services for householders who are in difficulties. As the House is aware, the Committee has considered advice provision generally and mortgage issues in particular at a number of its recent meetings.

As other Members have indicated, society faces an economic crisis that is unique in recent times with regard to the speed at which it has overtaken ordinary householders. Good decisions that were made by normal hardworking people when times were better are, in many cases, turning bad. The Committee does not believe that the Executive can come riding to the rescue, blank cheque in hand, of everyone who needs financial help in Northern Ireland. However, it believes that even a modest investment in good advice provision can be a tangible way to help people in Northern Ireland who just need some guidance in these difficult times.

As I said in the House last week, the Committee takes the view that prevention is better, and is almost always cheaper, than the cure. That sentiment has been echoed by Members in the debate. In the case of mortgages, prevention is about good mortgage advice in the first place and crisis guidance when things look like they are going wrong. The Committee welcomes elements of the Department for Social Development's mortgage-rescue scheme, which include expert advice provision.

The Committee understands that the Department is about to pilot mortgage-rescue advice provision. The Committee has also learnt of link-ups between housing associations and citizens advice bureaux in the provision of crisis-mortgage advice. Those moves are also to be welcomed. Notwithstanding those positive actions, the Committee believes that advice providers will face a further unprecedented surge in demand for their services as the recession worsens and unemployment and the fear of repossessions grow.

Therefore, the Committee believes that the time is right for careful review of advice provision throughout Northern Ireland. In its deliberations, it has heard from a large number of advice organisations, which I will not name as the list is too substantial and long. The Committee has been generally impressed, not only by the encyclopedic knowledge of the representatives of those organisations, but by their dedication to the sections of the public that they serve.

For the services provided by those organisations, some of which are regularly or solely involved in housing and mortgage issues, the Committee is keen to ensure good coverage throughout all parts of Northern Ireland, coupled with stable and commensurate financing arrangements.

I understand that, in April, the Committee will receive a briefing from the Department for Social Development on the future of advice provision in Northern Ireland. The Committee will — as it always does — approach that briefing and the subsequent consultation with an open mind and a good grasp of how important the issue is to people throughout the Province.

In conclusion, I want to re-emphasise the Committee's view that in the present economic straits, in which many investments seem to be losing their value, an investment by the Executive in sound advice on complex issues such as mortgages is bound to yield a good return for those households in Northern Ireland that need help.

**Mr Armstrong:** I am pleased to participate in the debate, which relates to an issue of real concern for the people of Northern Ireland. It is important that local politicians are seen to take the lead on this matter.

The worldwide recession has hit Northern Ireland at a difficult time, and job losses are announced every week. The sharp increase in house prices in Northern Ireland in recent years, coupled with irresponsible lending by banks, meant that many people were in deep trouble once the recession hit and once they lost their jobs. In 2008, there were 2,777 confirmed redundancies — an increase of 45% from 2007. However, even that figure masks the serious situation in the self-employed sector.

That is in addition to the steep increase in domestic household bills, such as electricity, heating oil, gas and

grocery bills. It is inevitable that people are feeling the pinch, and data on household repossessions support that assertion. Official figures show that applications for home repossessions increased by almost two-thirds in 2008 to 3,628 and most worryingly, the rate appeared to be accelerating in the last quarter of 2008.

According to the Court Service, during the fourth quarter of 2008, 939 writs and summonses were issued for mortgages, compared with 542 during the same period in 2007. That represents an increase of 73%. To put that figure in perspective, that is the equivalent of 70 people a week being threatened with eviction from the homes that they have bought. Real tales of human tragedy and hardship lie behind those numbers, with families uprooted and hopes and dreams lost. It is in no one's interests for anyone to lose a home. It is imperative that people seek help at the earliest possible stage, and that appropriate help is available and easily accessible.

In 2008, an incredible 13,900 enquiries were made to the Housing Rights Service. Last month, the service launched an initiative whereby it has a specialist adviser at the Royal Courts of Justice and Laganside Courts in Belfast. As with most things, however, such services and resources are scarce. It is clear that lenders and Government need to make a concentrated and co-ordinated effort to safeguard homes. It is in no one's interests to see people evicted from their homes.

This is another situation that requires a co-ordinated approach, with the cliché "joined-up Government" clear for all to see. Many agencies, such as Citizens Advice and Advice Northern Ireland, provide service and assistance to those in financial difficulties, including those who have lost their homes, are in debt or are unable to meet their mortgage repayments.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has funded pilot programmes that have indicated just how great a demand exists for such services. I am well aware of the pressures on budgets in the current climate, but I am in no doubt that the Executive need to look closely at providing funding for accredited financial services, including preventative measures, so that people are encouraged to seek advice before matters get out of hand. I commend the SDLP amendment.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster):** I welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue. The way in which the debate has been conducted reflects that importance. The motion relates to debt advice, and given the current economic climate, Members have, rightly, identified that that topic has become increasingly important.

*1.00 pm*

Last December, the Executive met to discuss details of measures to help people suffering from the credit crunch or economic downturn — call it what you will. As Ministers, we recognise the pressures on household

budgets, and we are committed to easing the financial hardship that is being experienced by so many people at this time. Dealing with debt was one of the five core themes that the Executive identified then, and that echoes many of the sentiments that have been expressed in the Chamber today. Indeed, it was identified by the proposer of the motion that the issue is one for the entire Executive. That was recognised last December.

My Department has had a long involvement in the delivery of debt advice. It has taken the lead in funding provision of face-to-face debt advice as part of Lifetime Opportunities, the Executive's anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy. One of the aims of the Executive-endorsed consumer strategy for Northern Ireland, first published in March 2002, was to establish a suitable framework for the delivery of an effective debt-advice service in Northern Ireland. Subsequently, the Department commissioned research that identified an existing publicly-funded infrastructure for debt advice in the voluntary and community sector. However, the Department recognised that there was a shortfall in the number of debt advisers providing front line, face-to-face advice. Let us face it, when most people are in difficulties they prefer to speak to someone face to face about those difficulties.

In January 2005, following the research findings, DETI launched a pilot scheme for face-to-face debt advice provided by the voluntary sector. The scheme attracted debtor clients from throughout Northern Ireland who made themselves available without any marketing or promotion. The overall assessment of the pilot scheme indicated that there was a need for continuing free, confidential, front line, face-to-face debt-advice service, and, in light of that experience, funding was secured, and put on a more permanent footing, by public tender in 2006.

Citizens Advice regional office secured the first contract for delivery of a debt advice service for the two-year period from 2006-08 through a competitive tendering process, and was awarded £800,000 to deliver that face-to-face debt-advice service at a number of outlets in Northern Ireland. The contract was so fully subscribed that the Department put a new contract in place to fund the continuing provision of free face-to-face debt advice.

Following a further public tender exercise, the Department awarded a new contract to Citizens Advice for three years, beginning on 1 April 2008, and the current level of funding for the face-to-face advice service is £400,000 per annum. From 1 April to 31 December 2008 the current face-to-face debt-advice service dealt with £17.6 million of consumer debt, representing 4,592 individual debts, presented by 1,611 consumers. That return covers three quarters of the year and already exceeds the total in 2007-08 by £2.6 million.

The figures for the final quarter of the financial year will, no doubt, follow a similar trend, if not increasing.

In anticipation of the rising demand, the Department sought and obtained further funding for free face-to-face debt advice in the comprehensive spending review (CSR) in 2007, and, last July, as was pointed out, I was pleased to announce that the provision for face-to-face debt advice would double to £800,000 per annum for the two years beginning 1 April 2009. A tender for the further face-to-face debt-advice service will be published this year.

I know that Members, particularly the proposer of the amendment, have expressed concerns about the current position of the tendering process. The reason for the slight delay is that the Department wishes to examine, in detail, the post-project evaluation report that was conducted. Also — and this is very important — we need to integrate the private-sector money that has been made available by the Ulster Bank. An extra £300,000 has been made available — which we were only too delighted to receive — and we want to make sure that that is part of the tendering process.

Face-to-face consultation is important, but it is not the only way to deliver advice. Throughout England, Scotland and Wales, other methods are also effective. Debtors in those countries have the benefit of a number of telephone advice services, some of which already operate effectively in Northern Ireland. They allow debtors to get advice while preserving a degree of anonymity — I am sure we can understand why people may want that.

With that in mind, the Department has obtained additional funding in the CSR of £200,000 a year, for 2009-2010 and 2010-11, for an enhanced telephone-based advice service for Northern Ireland. The tendering process for that project closes today; it has generated considerable interest, and things are moving forward significantly. The assessment panel that will award the tender will meet on 27 March, and panel members will receive the bids on Wednesday 18 March.

The current service is being delivered in neutral access areas, generally in town centre locations. Advice providers use extensive outreach measures in order to bring the service to areas of high social and economic deprivation. Mr Brady is right to point out that research by Citizens Advice revealed that there was a great deal of need in those areas. Although Citizens Advice holds the current debt-advice service contracts, agreements are also in place with Omagh Independent Advice Services and the Housing Rights Service, both of which are affiliated to Advice NI, in order to enhance coverage throughout Northern Ireland.

The three-year contract is a long-term commitment, which meets a long-term demand and allows advisers to specialise. I join Mr Brady in congratulating advisers

on their professionalism; it is something that the House should endorse. I know that they are under a lot of pressure and have to deal with many different cases. All of the people who go to them for advice have multiple debts, and it is a difficult problem to deal with. I wish to put on record my appreciation for the professionalism of the debt advisers.

As I said, the three-year contract meets a long-term demand and allows advisers to specialise. It also creates a regime for better training. Citizens Advice has agreed a partnership approach to the development and delivery of “Wiser Adviser” money-advice training in Northern Ireland. As a result, Citizens Advice and Advice NI — with funding from the Money Advice Trust — have been working together to meet training needs in what is an increasingly complex aspect of the advice services.

From 1 September 2008 to 31 December 2008, debt advisers handled £5 million of consumer debt, of which almost 60% — nearly £3 million — was owed to high street lenders, whether in the form of mortgages, credit cards, overdrafts or loans. Those statistics follow the trends in previous quarters. With that in mind, in November 2008, I invited the four local banks, jointly as an industry or separately as individual companies, to play a role with my Department in addressing the problem of over-indebtedness. As has been noted, I was pleased that Ulster Bank took up the invitation and pledged £300,000 of funding over two years to support the debt advice in which my Department is engaged.

In recent months, the debt advice service has drawn in a small number of individuals who have reported debts of £1 million and above. That is significant, and the House should note it. Those debts are related to assets acquired during the peak of the credit and property boom, which are now a feature of indebtedness, and my officials will monitor the developing situation.

My Department is also looking at other measures to help those who find themselves in debt. I propose to introduce a debt relief Bill that will set up a scheme to help individuals who can neither afford to pay their debts nor the costs of petitioning for bankruptcy. Under that proposed scheme, individuals with moderate levels of unsecured debt will be able to apply to the Official Receiver for a debt relief order. That would afford relief similar to that offered by a bankruptcy order, but at less than one third of the cost.

Much mention has been made in the debate about the Department for Social Development. A great deal is going on in that Department with regard to debt advice. Its opening doors strategy, which was launched in September 2007, aims to put in place a quality integrated advice service across Northern Ireland and establish a proper framework to ensure that services are planned and delivered in a way that matches resources to need. Furthermore, through the community support

programme (CSP), which is delivered by local councils, DSD has allocated £5.15 million, of which £1.9 million has been targeted specifically towards providing front line advice services.

At a regional level, DSD continues to core fund Advice NI, Citizens Advice and the Law Centre by up to £1.5 million. A Government advice and information group has been established, which consists of representatives from a range of Departments that have an interest in voluntary advice services. Again, DETI plays an active role in that group.

I will now turn briefly to a couple of issues that Members specifically mentioned. Alban Maginness referred to the Money Advice and Budgeting Service that is available in the Republic of Ireland. A report on child poverty, which was recently published by the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, recommended that we examine that model to see whether it could be of benefit to debt advice in Northern Ireland. My officials met with representatives of the Irish League of Credit Unions to explore whether the opportunity for such a model exists in Northern Ireland. Given the recent report on role and potential of credit unions in Northern Ireland by the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, it is a very opportune time to be looking at such a scheme.

Leslie Cree said that we were delivering the same level of service with the same level of funding. I must put on the record that that is absolutely not correct. We have doubled funding for face-to-face debt advice, added an extra £200,000 in funding for the telephone service and we have received £300,000 from the Ulster Bank. Therefore, we are not delivering the same level of service for the same level of funding, although I acknowledge that we are under considerable pressure given the economic climate.

Sean Neeson mentioned a specific DSD issue, which I am happy to take a note of and pass on to Margaret Ritchie.

Alex Attwood mentioned two issues. The first issue was the banks' management of their customer bases, which we have been mentioning to the banks in our meetings with them. Mr Attwood gave anecdotal evidence, and we have been saying that we need to look at specific cases to bring to the banks so that we can ask them what is happening. If we bring anecdotal cases to the banks, they will say that they cannot understand the reasons for what has happened. Therefore, we need to look closer at issues with the banks. I am concerned to hear that business loans are being converted into personal loans, because that puts personal properties and assets at a great deal of risk.

The second issue that Mr Attwood mentioned was on flexibility and procurement, and I hear what he said. We are very much aware of the 2002 report from

HM Treasury, which stated that if Government want smaller organisations to apply for tenders, they need to work with the voluntary and community organisations to take account of their distinctiveness. That process has been used for every tender exercise for debt advice that we have been involved in, and the fact that all our contracts to date have been successfully won by voluntary organisations from the third sector demonstrates that the approach is working in their favour.

We first entered debt advice in early 2005. Before that, debt advice funding was short term and piecemeal; it is not any more, because we have put it on a permanent footing. Hopefully, we will be able to look at the issues that have been raised in the debate, which has been worthwhile and taken place in a measured way.

I thank those Members who tabled the motion. I hope that I have outlined a wide range of current and future measures, which will, as the motion suggests, enhance existing debt-advisory services and provide additional resources to those organisations that help people with debt.

**Mr O'Loan:** I also thank all the Members who spoke in what has been a very constructive debate. There has been a very high level of understanding of the issue and of the very difficult situation in which many members of our community find themselves. There has been a great deal of sympathy for the position of those people. Given that, the united response by the Assembly is absolutely right. I give particular credit to the proposer of the motion, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, who was most constructive in what he said and spoke in a generous spirit. It is only right that I respond to that generosity, and, in light of it, I beg leave to withdraw the amendment.

*1.15 pm*

As far as debt is concerned, we seem to have been hit by a perfect storm. For many years, banks and other financial institutions threw money at people and encouraged them to incur high levels of debt. A situation was therefore created that can only be described as irresponsible. Given the current economic downturn, many people are losing their jobs, and in many cases, they find themselves over-indebted, with financial responsibilities that they cannot meet. Many Members referred to specific examples of people who are in perilous financial circumstances as a result of that situation. It requires a response, and I recognise the response that has been made and that continues to be worked through.

Looking to the future, once we have worked through this particularly difficult time, we need to work towards a situation whereby we are not merely creating rescue packages for people who get into dire circumstances, but we are able to give financial advice at a very early stage as people make their financial decisions. For

example, the Health Service is moving significantly from acute hospital provision to placing a much greater emphasis on public health and prevention. That same model should be applied to a person's finances. That should be the response when financial advice is being given — such advice needs to be given at an early stage, and it should be readily available.

Referring to the specific issue of loan sharks, Robin Newton mentioned people who collect debt. Some people do so perfectly legally, but we know very well that others do not do so legally. Their methods of enforcing contracts are well outside the law. That is something to which attention must be paid.

I recognise what is being done on the matter. The Minister detailed the £400,000 of funding that has been doubled to £800,000 and the £200,000 that has been made available for the telephone debt-advice service. That is all good. I welcome what the Ulster Bank is now doing. When the banks appeared before the Committee for Finance and Personnel on this very issue, I challenged them, but they had nothing to offer at that point. I welcome the fact that the Ulster Bank has now come on board significantly. Other banks and financial institutions ought to do the same. We should be putting pressure on them to do so.

I give credit to all the points that Members made. It is sometimes the individual cases that show the meaning of what we are doing. Some Members made it clear that we are not talking just about statistics. Mr McLaughlin, Mr Neeson and Mr Cree all referred to that point, and Mr Shannon and Mr Newton described particular cases that speak very eloquently about the issue.

In her response, the Minister outlined the reason for what she called a "slight delay". She knows that she will have the support of everyone in this House if she can bring in the final implementation of the funding that is at her disposal and make it available directly through front line advice services.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé an-sásta cead cainte a bheith agama ar an ábhar thábhachtach seo inniu. Aontaím leis an cuid is mó a dúradh.

I welcome my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin's having moved the motion on this fairly serious topic. As most Members outlined, this affects us all in our work as MLAs and elected representatives. I acknowledge that the amendment has now been withdrawn, and we acknowledge that we want to come out of here today with a united voice on this issue.

Debt affects many people, particularly in the present economic climate. In the past year, the number of people seeking debt counselling services from organisations such as Citizens Advice has doubled. I acknowledge the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's response to the debate.

Debt primarily affects people on low income, those suffering from illness, disabled people, people who have over-committed themselves, and those who have lost their jobs. On the other side of the argument, there has been irresponsible lending — some Members referred to the banks. Some people do not have the relevant skills or know-how to manage their resources. Nevertheless, debt is concentrated among people on low incomes and, in this economic climate, those who have lost their jobs. Some areas of concern are credit cards, personal loans, bank loans, hire purchase and mortgages — many people are concerned about their homes being repossessed.

Sinn Féin thanks the SDLP for withdrawing its amendment, and it accepts that the issue does not just concern one Minister. Arlene Foster referred to the Executive's response to the matter and to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's doubling of funding for face-to-face debt-advice services.

Many of us who are councillors will know that the Department for Social Development has provided funds to help citizens' advice bureaux throughout council areas. For example, in my constituency, the funding received by the Lisburn citizens advice bureau has enabled it to open outreach centres in places such as Poleglass, Twinbrook and Knockmore.

So there is an issue around the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development. In addition, the Minister for Employment and Learning is responsible for funding the Law Centre. On the one hand, there is a response to this issue from individual Ministers, and then there is the Executive and all the other Ministers. I am glad that we have a united front on this issue.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment referred to changes to the tendering process, which means that many voluntary-sector organisations are now able to bid for contracts. In addition, she mentioned a new telephone service, which is useful for people who are unable to attend debt advice centres. Also, in April, debt relief orders, aimed at people on low incomes, will be introduced to provide an alternative to declarations of bankruptcy. Positive measures are being taken, and the Minister reminded us that funding for such measures will have doubled over the period of the comprehensive spending review.

The motion is an attempt to focus on the fact that people are undergoing unprecedented economic difficulties. More and more people are losing their jobs, and, in turn, many people have multiple debts, including credit-card debt and personal loans. If people lose their jobs, they are then in danger of losing their homes.

Robin Newton made that point, and he made a fair point that the Minister of Education should try to get people involved at an early age in managing their

finances. People are concerned about over-committing themselves with credit cards and personal loans.

Mr Newton talked about home repossessions, and spoke about incidents of which he has personal experience in which people had their homes repossessed and were put out of their jobs.

Lesley Cree referred to the role of Citizens Advice. All Members will recognise the important role that citizens advice bureaux — and the many voluntary organisations — have played in this area over the years. Sean Neeson spoke of his experience of being on the dole — or on benefits — when the Assembly was closed down a number of years ago. He made interesting suggestions about linking benefit uptake with debt and the benefit system.

Jim Shannon also referred to mortgage arrears. The British Government has to be made to recognise, as we do, that house repossessions should be the last resort rather than the first. He also spoke about what Arlene Foster has done on the issue in recent years.

My colleague Mickey Brady, who has worked in the area of debt advice for many years, spoke of his experiences. He said, rightly, that the issue is complex and that there needs to be a more strategic way of dealing with its funding. I know, for example, that funding for a lot of citizens advice bureaux and at local government level has been patchy, and there has not been a strategic approach to funding, because it comes from DSD to councils. As Mickey Brady, I believe, said, a more consistent approach is required, and I see some evidence for that from the Minister's announcement today on funding, particularly for face-to-face debt-advisory services.

Alex Attwood talked about banks and their lending practices, and how they are turning business accounts into, maybe, personal accounts and closing some people's bank accounts. There is an issue there. I agree with what he said that rather than people — particularly those from the voluntary and community sector — having to go through a tendering process every time, they should be grant aided.

David Hilditch spoke on behalf of the Committee for Social Development, which, like all of us, recognises the issue with which people are faced with regard to debt and the importance of trying to help them. That is key to this debate. It is imperative that the existing provision is increased to ensure that advice on how to get out of financial difficulties is available to all people, regardless of whether they are on low incomes, have lost their jobs or are disabled.

I ask the House to support the motion. I acknowledge the Minister's comments about the motion and what she is trying to do to address the problem. I thank the Members who spoke, and I acknowledge that the amendment has been withdrawn. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr O'Loan has sought leave to withdraw the amendment to the motion. Is it the will of the House that the amendment be withdrawn?

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes the increasing amount of personal debt and the crisis facing many mortgage holders; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a package of measures to enhance existing debt-advisory services, and to provide additional resources and training for community based organisations providing debt counselling.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### World Wildlife Fund Earth Hour 2009

**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 the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Mr Gallagher:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Assembly Commission and the Executive to support the World Wildlife Fund's earth hour 2009 by switching off the lights in Parliament Buildings and all Government departmental buildings at an appropriate time on Saturday 28 March 2009.

*1.30 pm*

Given the very high number of empty places around the Chamber this afternoon, some members of the public might well conclude that the lights have already gone out at Stormont. Furthermore, considering the remarks that have been made by the Environment Minister at various times, and his refusal to acknowledge that climate change is happening, many people might also believe that the lights have gone out as far as our environment is concerned.

Earth hour is a global initiative that is aimed at sending a strong message to world leaders in particular that we must all continue the fight against climate change. This is not simply a motion proposed on behalf of a few people in Northern Ireland who care about the environment and who are somehow acting alone. Globally, 1,430 cities and towns in 80 countries have signed up to earth hour, so they have already committed to switch off the lights in homes, offices and Government buildings.

Locally, as some Members will know, a few of our district councils have committed themselves to the initiative. Belfast City Council, Armagh City and District Council, Limavady Borough Council, and Ballymoney Borough Council are among the number that we know of at this point that have taken a decision to switch off their lights during earth hour.

When we become more energy efficient, we save money on our energy bills and contribute to a greener and more sustainable environment. As everyone knows, in the present circumstances, the public are tightening their belts and are thinking of ways to save money on heating their homes or by driving less and making more use of public transport. If such savings can be made — not only financially, but in relation to saving our planet — there is a strong case for supporting the earth hour initiative and encouraging further behavioural changes, in order to deliver a sustainable environment as well as a sustainable economy.

Therefore, it is important that the Assembly sends a clear message that we take the environment seriously. I believe that Northern Ireland needs to play a role in the global initiative against climate change.

Recently, the management school at Queen's University carried out a study on greenhouse gas performance and the UK economy. That report stated:

"As the UK economy moves towards a low carbon economy, Greenhouse Gas performance and efficiencies will become increasingly important to regional competitiveness."

The study found that the greenhouse gas efficiency levels in England outperform the efficiency levels in each of the other countries, which, after England, were rated in the following order: Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The study further shows that if the Northern Ireland economy operated at the greenhouse-gas efficiency level that the English economy presently does, gross value added in Northern Ireland could be increased by 50%.

Economic competitiveness is one reason for seeking to control our carbon emissions, but there are others. Regulation, for example, is a key issue. As Members will know, we have legal obligations in relation to climate change. The Climate Change Act 2008 aims at reducing carbon emissions by 80% by 2050. We are also controlled through the directives issued as a result of EU legislation, some of which we are failing to meet. That legislation aims to achieve a 20% reduction in Europe's energy consumption by 2020. The energy performance of all our buildings is also covered by EU legislation.

The present global economic downturn presents many challenges at governmental level, not least energy efficiency and improving the environment. We can see already how the American, Irish and British Governments are paying more attention to increasing efficiency and making best use of resources, including environmental resources.

President Obama referred to the environment in his inaugural address. Since then, he has announced a "green new deal" and in doing so, he pointed out that America's economic downturn presents a huge opportunity to put people back to work in ways that will transform the economy and improve carbon efficiency.

Closer to home, Gordon Brown has committed his Government to achieving both greenhouse gas reductions and economic growth. On different occasions, he has talked about the present financial crisis as an opportunity to address climate change.

Members may know that, in recent months, the Irish Government launched a scheme to make homes across the country more energy efficient. In addition to improving energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions, the initiative created 2,000 new jobs at a time when there was bad news on the jobs front.

Realising Northern Ireland's indigenous energy potential and removing the barriers that exist to its development must be a key focus for our Executive. We import more than 90% — close to 95% — of our energy, and that is neither reliable nor sustainable. There is no reason why we should not increase significantly our production of electricity from the sources that we all know about — the wind, the sun, the sea, and the production of crops, such as biomass. We have an abundance of indigenous renewable energy resources waiting to be harnessed. Not only will they reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, they will open up major economic opportunities and bring all-important jobs and other significant social benefits to the people here.

Our First Minister and deputy First Minister are in the United States of America in an attempt, among other things, to encourage investment here. It is important, therefore, that this Government reflect the same approach as that being adopted by other Governments, and to which I have already referred: one that shows that carbon efficiency and renewable energy have been put at the forefront of our policies.

I return again to the recent study from Queen's University — its conclusions are worthy of further consideration. The study said that those regions that will be most competitive will be those that are able to outperform other regions as regards high production of goods and services per unit of greenhouse gas impacts. In the future — and probably in the near future — the efficiency with which greenhouse gas emissions are used will be a fundamentally important determinant of our competitiveness. Countries and regions with low greenhouse gas efficiencies may, therefore, find themselves at a disadvantage. It is important for all of us that, as a first step, we take the earth hour initiative seriously.

I ask Members to support the motion, so that we can show — as a first step — that we are doing our bit to improve the environment for future generations in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McKay:** A LeasCheann Comhairle, I thank the Members for tabling the motion. Sinn Féin will speak in favour of it.

Earth hour 2009 is a global event. It is symbolic and it will send out a clear message to political leaders that more needs to be done to combat climate change. As Mr Gallagher said, a number of local business and councils have signed up to it across Ireland, including my council in Ballymoney.

This Assembly should also play its role in setting an example. Belfast City Council is supporting earth hour, and my party colleague Mayor Tom Hartley outlined that the council is committed to creating a greener, cleaner city in which good environmental practice is at

the core of all policy and practice. That is something that all our councils should replicate.

Climate change is already having a big impact. At the United Nations climate change conference in Poznań, all countries agreed to make operational an adaptation fund. That means that some \$60 million could be made available to help poorer vulnerable nations cope with the impact of climate change, and help to secure the survival of some of the least-developed countries and some island states. Good work was done at Poznań, but much, much more needs to be done if a final agreement is to be reached in Copenhagen in December 2009.

The World Wildlife Fund's earth hour will go some way towards publicising and highlighting the small steps that we all can take to reduce our carbon footprint and work towards practically saving energy. In the current economic climate, it will also go some way towards helping to save money.

Like the majority of elected Assemblies across Europe, this Assembly needs to send out the very clear message that it believes that human behaviour influences climate change. This society needs to be more energy efficient and less reliant on finite fuels, because their fluctuating prices throw hundreds of thousands of local people into fuel poverty. This Assembly needs to recognise the need to do something about that rather than just talking about it.

We need to be more proactive about sustainable development. We need to prevent the strangulation of the renewables industry, and we need to present a coherent position on environmental matters that is modern, constructive and forward-thinking — not fundamentalist, blinkered and economically short-sighted.

I am sure that the Minister of the Environment will try to resist the attempts that are being made to switch off this Assembly's lights in an effort to highlight climate change. However, I urge the rest of this Assembly to take this opportunity to knock his lights out. Go raibh maith agat.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** Symbolism and normalisation are two things that are very important in Northern Ireland, and the power of both concepts is well understood here. The symbolism of switching off lights in this Building at the same time as others in 934 cities across 80 countries is a sign of our identification with the common cause of all humanity against the effects of global warming.

Iconic landmarks across the globe will be plunged into darkness, including Nelson's Column, the Forth Bridge, the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, Table Mountain in Cape Town, and Sydney Opera House. The London Eye will also be dimmed for an

hour. Stormont — the internationally recognised symbol of Northern Ireland — should be no exception.

That move would also place Northern Ireland in the mainstream of world opinion and would demonstrate that this Assembly is in step with the vast bulk of scientific and reputable opinion on this matter. The Executive have signed up to delivering key targets to protect the environment and to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of Northern Ireland and the UK. That will mean reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25% — to below 1990 levels — by 2025, and ensuring that 12% of our electricity is generated from indigenous renewable sources by 2012.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of Northern Ireland appearing to be normal and in the mainstream of world opinion. I was heartened to discover that Ballymoney, in my North Antrim constituency, has signed up for the one-hour symbolic act along with Belfast, Armagh and Limavady. The Belfast wheel, Belfast City Hall and the Victoria Square shopping centre will participate, and I encourage others to do the same.

In the United Kingdom, 90% of the energy that is produced is based on burning hydrocarbons and producing carbon dioxide. That is a far higher dependency than in countries such as Canada, France, Japan and in Scandinavia.

Dependence on imported natural gas is rising from its current rate of 50% to an estimated 80% in 10 years. The built environment accounts already for 50% of all end-use energy that is produced, with transport and industry each accounting for only 25%. Therefore, the built environment has to be the major target when considering any cutbacks in emissions, and there are clear implications for building design in the future.

The figures that I provided came from Sir David King, the Government's former chief scientific adviser. Unlike some figures that have been quoted in the Chamber recently, they are not plucked from sources that are open to question.

*1.45 pm*

By supporting the motion, the Assembly can show that, as a body, it is made up of sensible people who listen to properly validated scientific advice. By doing so, we can undo some of the damage that the Environment Minister has undoubtedly inflicted on our international standing. I support the motion.

**Mr B Wilson:** At first sight, the motion may seem frivolous and unimportant when compared with some of the major problems that the Assembly faces. However, that is not the case, given that it highlights two of the major threats facing Governments throughout the world: the security of energy supplies and climate change. I, therefore, welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I thank Tommy Gallagher for tabling it.

I am pleased to see that the media have covered this year's earth hour already. That contrasts with their total lack of interest in the event last year. When I issued a press statement asking all public bodies — and, in particular, the Northern Ireland Assembly — to switch off unnecessary lights for an hour, there was no media interest at all. Like most of my press releases, the media ignored it totally, and the lights stayed on.

**Some Members:** Shame.

**Mr B Wilson:** I had hoped that it would have been a success, and I had even hoped that the authorities would have questioned the point of lighting public buildings after hours or at weekends when those buildings are not in use. However, while the lights were going out in cities across the world, Belfast was oblivious to the appeal. In fact, I must have been the only person in Northern Ireland to respond to last year's earth hour appeal. Not only did I turn off the lights, but I turned off the television and sat on the sofa, in front of a log fire, cuddling the wife for an hour. It was a rare and enjoyable experience. *[Laughter.]*

Outside of Northern Ireland, the switch-off was a great success, and many millions turned off their lights. For example, in Christchurch, New Zealand, energy use was cut by 13%.

This year, the local media are taking much more of an interest. In fact, I have been asked already to submit two articles to the local press. However, the aim of earth hour is not just to save energy, but to highlight how much energy we waste. It is part of an awareness campaign to make people think about how they use energy. For example, do lights in public buildings really need to be switched on in the evenings and at the weekends? Can we reduce the length of time that lighting is provided? Can we use energy-saving light bulbs or renewable energy? Are the lights really necessary? If earth hour can persuade us to examine our overall energy use, it will have been a success.

Climate change is a major threat to the future of our planet. In order to combat climate change, it is essential that we reduce our energy consumption. Indeed, a report issued just last week from the climate change summit in Copenhagen expressed concern that the earlier UN estimates of rises in sea levels were too low. It would appear that the previous Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change did not take into account the potential impact of the melting of the polar ice caps. I am sure that even a climate change sceptic such as our own Environment Minister would admit that any reduction in energy use is desirable. Energy costs make up a significant proportion of the average family's expenditure, and any reduction will help the fight against fuel poverty.

As oil prices have fallen in recent months, there has been a reduction in the previous drive to provide energy

from renewable sources. We have grown complacent, but that complacency is not justified. Although oil prices have fallen because of a reduction in demand due to the worldwide recession, that will not continue when the world economy picks up again.

As we move out of the recession, the demand for oil will grow, particularly in China and India. Demand will be considerably above the 2007 level, which created massive hardships in energy consumption throughout the world. The price of a barrel of oil is likely to exceed last year's record of \$150. Therefore, we should be taking advantage of the current low oil prices to reduce our consumption and develop alternative sources of energy. Indeed, we have already talked about some of the opportunities to develop alternative energy in Northern Ireland.

It is important that the Assembly shows leadership by responding to earth hour and sending out a message to the whole community that we must reduce energy consumption and increase investment in alternative energy from renewable sources. I support the motion and look forward to an hour-long cuddle on 28 March.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I am not going to comment on whether Mr Wilson generated electricity while sitting on the sofa at home.

I support the motion. I am pleased to be able to speak on the subject today, and I thank Tommy Gallagher for bringing it to the Chamber.

It is vital that all politicians and governmental institutions in the North show leadership on the issue of climate change, as others have done around the globe. Commentators in the United States believe that climate change and global warming would have been at the top of the list of priorities of newly elected President Barack Obama had he not inherited the financial crisis, such is the seriousness with which world leaders are treating concerns for the future of the planet.

Earth hour will see non-essential lighting being extinguished at many iconic landmarks, buildings and structures around the world, without public safety being compromised. The places taking part in the initiative include the Las Vegas strip, the Christ the Redeemer statue in Brazil, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Colosseum in Rome and the Sydney Opera House. The Scottish Parliament and buildings in Dublin, Cardiff and various other locations across these islands are also participating in the earth hour initiative.

It is only right that the Building in which we sit, and other public buildings in the North, take part in the initiative in an effort to raise awareness of the major threat of global warming and of mankind's contribution to it. It is time to show leadership, and I hope that —

as a result of the initiative — all of us will look seriously at how we can make a daily impact on climate change. This must not be a throwaway initiative, to be forgotten when it is over. We must continue to take every opportunity to play our part in the global response to this global problem. Some 50 million people across 35 countries took part in earth hour 2008. The WWF hopes to surpass that number considerably by having 1 billion people involved this year.

We have had bad publicity at local, national and international level recently thanks to our Environment Minister's position on climate change — a position which few people with any relevant scientific credentials agree with. The Assembly and the Executive must send a message to the people of the North, and beyond, that we are committed to tackling climate change. However, our efforts must not stop there; we must seize all opportunities to implement sustained initiatives to tackle climate change, such as generating more power from renewable sources.

I have no doubt that the Member for East Antrim's house will be lit up like a Christmas tree as he polishes his motorbike for summertime excursions. Nevertheless, I encourage members of the public to get involved in earth hour 2009, switch off between 8.30 pm and 9.30 pm on Saturday 28 March, and, thereby, declare that they want the issue to be addressed. If we fail to tackle global warming and climate change, the costs to this generation, and future generations, will be too great. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Beggs:** I, too, support the motion and the concept of earth hour. The earth hour initiative to turn off unnecessary electrical devices and lights for one hour does two things. First, it raises public awareness of both the amount of energy that we are consuming as a society and the need for everyone to mitigate the scenario of runaway climate change.

Secondly, it helps all of us, as individuals, to take a first small step, if we have not already done so, towards curbing carbon emissions. We can join in as individuals, public bodies or private companies. I hope that this will be a first step, and that, subsequently, there will be follow-up actions as the switch-off helps to raise the profile of the issue of energy consumption and global warming in the public domain.

Unlike our Environment Minister, I believe that, collectively, we can make a difference. If we all make energy savings, significant collective savings, which will benefit our environment and conserve our dwindling fossil-fuel supply, can result. I praise the efforts of the World Wildlife Fund and commend individuals and public authorities that have already pledged to participate in this venture at the end of this month.

We, as an Assembly, should do our bit and switch off the lights in Parliament Buildings for that hour on Saturday 28 March.

Other Members have asked whether we need so many lights on for so long and whether we need so many lights on at 3.00 am. That is something that the Assembly Commission can look into subsequently, and it should be considered with regard to Civil Service buildings.

I take this opportunity to praise the work of WWF in the southern group environmental health area. Last week, with the Environment Committee, I visited the Chrysalis Women's Centre in Brownlow. Collectively, that group has widened the knowledge of energy usage in the community. It has encouraged cycling, and it is now encouraging its members to work in partnership with the local health trust and Brownlow Integrated College to grow their own vegetables. Therefore, other benefits can follow. Turning out the lights is purely a first small step, but an important one. I hope that it serves as a catalyst to spur many on to take further steps.

There is a growing awareness, particularly among young people, of the need to become more energy efficient and of the undeniable links between human activity, increasing CO<sub>2</sub> deposits in the atmosphere and climate change.

In that context, it is impossible not to comment on the recent actions of our Environment Minister. We all know that once he was a global-warming alarmist. A few short years ago, he signed early-day motions at Westminster, describing climate change as the greatest threat to civilisation. However, he now gets worldwide fame and media coverage with his denial of man's contribution to climate change. My researcher watched the Minister's YouTube video on climate change, recorded at the Giant's Causeway, before the Minister took the step of removing that embarrassing bit of footage. My researcher described the video to me as a 10-minute ramble, in which our Environment Minister, Sammy Wilson, basically said that climate change —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I have given the Member some latitude, but his remarks have now strayed far from the motion.

**Mr Beggs:** Climate change is very important and there is a need for us all, not only to turn lights out for an hour, but to take the issue seriously. I hope that our Environment Minister will do so.

**Mr McKay:** Does the Member agree that from a party-political point of view, there appears to be a lack of DUP Members who are willing to speak on this issue? Does he agree that that is a sign of the disagreement and disarray in the DUP on this issue?

**Mr Beggs:** I find that very strange, and it is for the DUP to answer for the paucity of its Members in the Chamber and for their failure to speak in this debate.

Members should bear in mind that this issue is referred to in the Programme for Government, to which all Ministers have signed up. In the Programme for Government, it states that climate change is:

“one of the most serious problems facing the world.”

It also says:

“we are determined to play our part in addressing this challenge by reducing our impact on climate change.”

Furthermore, it says:

“our carbon footprint is relatively high and well beyond a level that is sustainable in the longer-term.”

Why is the DUP failing to speak on this subject, which is a very closely related matter? The earth hour is simply a focal point, and — I hope — a catalyst that will spur others on to greater efforts.

2.00 pm

When pressed, various quotations have been given to me as the source of information as to why the Minister takes that line. I ask Members to Google four words — “Heartland Institute” and “Exxon Mobil” — and see what comes up. Then, join the dots.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I am calling the next Member to speak because you have gone well off the mark. I call Dr Alasdair McDonnell, who, I am sure, will not stray from the motion.

**Dr McDonnell:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I assure you that your confidence is well founded.

Climate change is a very serious issue if not the most serious and challenging issue facing humanity. That is not just my opinion, or the opinion of some in the Chamber; it is the consensus opinion of world renowned scientists, even if it is not that of our own Minister of the Environment.

As I understand it, the World Wildlife Fund’s earth hour, on Saturday 28 March, is a commitment by, at this stage, more than one billion people in 1,500 cities and towns across the globe to turn off the lights in their homes and places of work for an hour. That represents an act of global solidarity and responsibility. The aim is to send a clear, strong message to political leaders about the need to take the steps needed, and the significant investment decisions around the infrastructure and energy systems that are required, to tackle the climate change that is taking place before our very eyes.

Earth hour also aims to increase local and international public awareness of the need for every individual to take responsibility in their daily lives. Individuals must take the necessary steps in their homes and workplaces to use energy more economically and frugally, and in an environmentally efficient manner.

Given those objectives, the World Wildlife Fund’s earth hour cannot and should not be belittled or sneered at. Our Minister’s views on climate change fly in the face of rigorous environmental evidence and have, without question, damaged the standing of Northern Ireland and its credibility on the global stage. No one is suggesting that that damage will be undone by passing the motion; however, it will signal that most of us know the facts and are prepared to provide leadership. If Northern Ireland were to join other places around the world and participate in earth hour, it would give a very clear signal that we are progressing, progressive, and proactive about promoting energy efficiency and encouraging a sustainable green change in people’s attitudes and behaviour.

If Members are serious — and my colleagues and I in the SDLP are serious — about meeting the 20% reduction in energy consumption by 2020, we have to support the motion. We must commit ourselves clearly and give a public lead. Not only will that bring considerable environmental benefits, but encouraging greater energy efficiency in homes and in the workplace will bring about a very significant economic saving and benefit.

Our over-reliance on imported fossil fuels is what got us into such a crazy situation in the first place in which, last summer, oil prices rocketed out of control and left hundreds of thousands of people in fuel poverty. We cannot afford to let that situation develop again. If we do so, we would be criminally responsible. If we are serious about tackling climate change, we need to develop a local, customised energy model that meets the needs of the customer and not the producer.

When I was a child growing up in a rural area —

**Mr Neeson:** The glens of Antrim.

**Dr McDonnell:** — in the glens of Antrim, as I been reminded by Sean Neeson, who has seized control of a large part of the glens of Antrim and annexed it to the East Antrim constituency.

When I was growing up, people burned turf — we are told perhaps that that was not environmentally friendly and that we had to keep the bogs — firewood, and all sorts of things. Over a period of time, pressures were created to turn people toward more coal and more oil. The net result of that has been that when coal goes off the market and oil prices go through the roof, people drop very quickly into fuel poverty.

If all our energy potential is to be harnessed, our efforts require investment in local energy efficiency and in a renewables industry that works. Not only would that help to create a sustainable environment but it would help to create a sustainable economy. As President Obama’s “green new deal” recognises, building a renewables industry will not only boost industry but significantly boost employment. That sector will be a

key component of the new sustainable economy that we will need as we emerge from the recession.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Please draw your remarks to a close.

**Dr McDonnell:** I could go on, Mr Deputy Speaker —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Please do not. *[Laughter.]*

**Dr McDonnell:** The motion is a good one. I support it, and I ask that the House support it.

**Mr Neeson:** I am speaking on behalf of the Assembly Commission. On Saturday 28 March 2009 at 8.30 pm, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) aims to get one billion people around the world to turn off their lights for one hour to mark earth hour. Homes, businesses and iconic landmarks in more than 1,000 cities across the world will go into darkness, sending out a dramatic expression of concern about the effects of climate change and demonstrating that it is possible to take positive action. At the end of 2009, leaders from 192 countries will meet in Copenhagen to decide how to tackle climate change. That will provide the greatest chance to put in place the means to combat what many believe to be the biggest threat to people and wildlife.

Last year, 50 million people across 35 countries switched off their lights for one hour. San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, the Coliseum in Rome and the Sydney Opera House were all plunged into darkness. This year, WWF aims to reach one billion people, which would make it the largest mass-participation event the world has ever seen. Belfast City Hall, the Belfast wheel and Victoria Square's dome will join major landmarks worldwide, including Nelson's Column, the Forth bridges and the Eiffel Tower in plunging into darkness for one hour.

I am delighted to say that the Assembly Commission plans to switch off the external floodlighting around Parliament Buildings and the street lighting along Prince of Wales Avenue from 8.30 pm until 9.30 pm on 28 March to support earth hour. Although a pre-planned function is taking place in Parliament Buildings, it is hoped that the majority of the internal lights can also be switched off. Security and events staff on duty will ensure that health and safety issues and security issues are properly managed. Consultation will take place with the Department of Finance and Personnel's estate-maintenance division to ensure that security and safety on the wider estate are not in any way compromised.

The aim of earth hour is for people to unite and make a bold statement to show that they are concerned about climate change, in order to convince the world's leaders that it is possible to take positive action. The Assembly Commission is pleased to be able to join with others across the globe by switching off the lights at Parliament Buildings for one hour on the evening of Saturday 28 March.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Before I call the Minister to respond, I ask any Member who has important business to discuss to take it outside in order to allow other Members to be heard.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds):** As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am always keen to support any motion that highlights the potential opportunities for efficient use of public money and for saving money for the public purse in Northern Ireland. As the Department with responsibility for managing the Government estate, the Department of Finance and Personnel has invested £180,000 in upgrading the interior lighting in office buildings to more efficient occupancy-sensor lighting, which will automatically switch off when offices or buildings are unoccupied for a period.

It should also be stated that a number of buildings also have exterior lighting, which some may perceive as purely aesthetic. However, it is important to recognise the important role that lighting plays in providing well-lit access for health and safety purposes and in improving security.

The central energy efficiency fund invests up to £2 million annually in grants to the public sector for the delivery of energy efficiency or renewable technology projects. In 2008-09, 41 projects received funding, with the aim of delivering savings of £1 million in the first year. Therefore, where practicable, I am happy for the terms of the motion to be applied to buildings of Departments, taking into account cost, health and safety, and security issues. Lighting on the Stormont estate will be switched off for earth hour 2009.

Officials in my Department are working with colleagues in those Departments that occupy Dundonald House, Castle Buildings and Stormont Castle in order to seek their participation. Obviously, this is a matter for other Departments to decide for themselves. However, I encourage them to participate in their buildings where practicable.

To conclude, I believe that Mr Brian Wilson said that it is important to switch off unnecessary lights for that hour. I am sure that Members will agree that all unnecessary lights and, indeed, energy-using appliances should be switched off at all times, not just for an hour on Saturday 28 March 2009.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is extremely important that the reasons that action on climate change is so urgent and crucial are written into the record. I have a briefing document on earth hour that refers to successive reports from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — the last of which involved over 3,800 scientists from over 150 countries — that put the reality of human-induced climate change beyond any doubt.

The evidence, to which my colleague Dr Coulter referred, indicates that 80% cuts in global greenhouse gas emissions are needed in order to keep global average temperature rises below 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels and to avoid irreversible and devastating changes in the earth's natural systems and climate.

It is important to note the worthy comments that were made in the debate about the scepticism that has been shown by the Minister who has responsibility for the environment — it would be too much of a misnomer to call him an Environment Minister, because that he is not — about the consequences that have been predicted if that temperature threshold were to be exceeded.

For example, in Africa, between 350 million and 600 million people will suffer water shortages or increased competition for water. Agricultural yields could halve by 2020, while arid areas will expand by 8%. In Asia, up to 1 billion people will suffer water shortages as supplies dwindle as a result of the melting of the Himalayan glaciers. Maze and wheat yields will fall by up to 5% in India. Rice crops in China will drop by up to 12%, and there will be increased risk of coastal flooding.

In Australia and New Zealand, there will be between 3,000 and 5,000 more heat-related deaths each year. By 2030, water supplies will no longer be guaranteed in parts of southern and eastern Australia, and there will be annual bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef.

In Europe, warmer temperatures will increase wheat yields by up to 25% in the north. However, water availability in the south will drop by up to one quarter. Heatwaves, forest fires and extreme weather events, such as flash flooding, will become more frequent, as will the incidence of the consequent new diseases.

In Latin America, up to 77 million people will face water shortages. Tropical glaciers will disappear. Tropical forests will become savannah, and there will be increased risk of coastal flooding in low-lying areas such as El Salvador and Guyana.

Indeed, that is the background to the motion. My colleague Mr Gallagher referred to the participation in earth hour of people in 1,430 cities and towns in 80 countries. It is important that the Assembly gives a lead on the issue. As regards reliance on fossil fuels and the need to achieve energy efficiency, to which the Minister referred, it is extremely important that the drive to achieve energy efficiency is put into action in the Building and in those for which Government Departments have responsibility.

2.15 pm

Mr McKay spoke in favour of the motion and mentioned the Minister's unusual remarks. Rev Coulter said that 12% of electricity must be derived from indigenous renewable sources by 2012. We need to

show that we support the mainstream global thinking on such important issues as the production of CO<sub>2</sub>.

Mr Wilson referred to his —

**Mr B Wilson:** Brian Wilson.

**Mr McGlone:** Yes, Brian Wilson; he is the only Mr Wilson present. He made important points about the use of lights and renewable energy, and expressed the concerns that arose from the report of the climate change summit in Copenhagen. I completely buy into his practice of having a cuddle for the environment. I am up for that. However, there has been complacency around the use of energy for renewables, and the reinstating of grants for solar and thermal heating is necessary. Those measures save energy and overall costs, reduce consumption, and create jobs and employment.

Mr Boylan referred to electricity usage. It is important that we show leadership, and the President of the United States is doing that. It remains to be seen how that will pan out, but we look forward to it. In regard to earth hour, we could have a non-weekend day whereby buildings that normally use a large amount of power could produce a meaningful and tangible reduction. That does not apply to Government or public buildings only — we should all do likewise in our own private buildings and homes.

I thank Mr Beggs for his comments on individuals, private bodies, public bodies, Government buildings and Departments. Collectively, we need to make that difference. He praised the work of WWF. Some of its representatives are here, and accompanied us on a visit to Craigavon last Thursday, during which we witnessed the work of the Chrysalis project, which demonstrated the determination and dedication of a community group that works with statutory agencies and the local education authorities to provide joined-up thinking and working in the interests in the environment — something that is lacking in many areas. Mr Beggs is right to pay tribute to that programme. As elected representatives, it is our responsibility to show leadership to the many young people who are concerned about the environment.

My colleague Dr McDonnell referred to the need for global solidarity and the need for all political leaders to send a clear message. He said that the Minister's views on that are slightly askew. However, the rest of us have to pick up the pieces and behave and act responsibly in that regard. He made a valid point that last year's rise in fuel costs, as we all know from our constituencies, contributed to fuel poverty and created difficulties for many people who were previously on the breadline. It makes sense to address environmental issues and fuel poverty issues together.

Mr Neeson referred to the WWF's aim to reach out to one billion people. I thank him for outlining a series of measures that are being taken in Parliament

Buildings on behalf of the Assembly Commission. We are taking action for that one hour, and it is, perhaps, a sign of things to come. Given that Members are in and out of offices every day, we should, perhaps, switch off our lights. I have noticed that some bulbs in the building are of high wattage and consume huge amounts of electricity.

I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his comments on the efficient use of renewables and for providing investment and £2 million to the central energy efficiency fund and other projects. However, I urge him to encourage all his colleagues to show leadership and collective wisdom on the issue of climate change. I support the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls on the Assembly Commission and the Executive to support World Wildlife Fund's earth hour 2009 by switching off the lights in Parliament Buildings and all Government departmental buildings at an appropriate time on Saturday 28 March 2009.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time.

2.30 pm

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

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Members may be aware that a delegation from the Canadian Parliament is visiting Parliament Buildings. Some members of the delegation have taken their seats in the Public Gallery, and they are very welcome. On behalf of the Assembly, I extend the warmest of welcomes to the honourable Michael Duffy, the honourable David Smith, Mr Dean Del Mastro MP, the honourable Geoff Regan MP, Monsieur Raynald Blais MP and Mr Pat Martin MP.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### EDUCATION

#### School Viability Assessment

1. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Education to outline the process for assessing the viability of a school. (AQO 2286/09)

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Tá sé iontach tábhachtach go bhfuil an córas oideachais bunaithe ar chóras scoileanna láidre inmharthana a sholáthraíonn ardchaighdeán oideachais do pháistí.

It is very important that our education system is founded on a base of strong and viable schools that deliver high-quality education to our children. In the first instance, it is a matter for the relevant education authority to assess the viability of a school within the parameters set out in the Department's sustainable schools policy.

The sustainable schools policy sets out six key criteria to be considered in assessing a school's viability. The provision of quality education is the overriding policy consideration. The six criteria are quality educational experience; stable enrolment trends; a sound financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community. Any review of a school's future viability must be handled carefully and sensitively, and it must consider the local circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

Should the education authority assess that a school is not viable, there is a statutory requirement for a development proposal to be published when a school is

being closed or amalgamated. The development proposal process provides the opportunity for extensive local consultation, and before a proposal is published there is a statutory requirement for boards to consult with any schools that may be affected by that proposal. There is also a statutory duty on the proposer to consult with the governors, parents and teachers of the school or schools affected by the proposal.

The publication of the development proposal initiates a statutory two-month consultation period. At the end of that period, I take into account all the relevant information, including the representations received and the educational needs of the children, in making a decision.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that a school that scores highly in all six of the criteria that she outlined — including the quality of education that is provided, which she referred to as the most important criterion — is viable and should remain open? If so, does she agree that Anamar Primary School, which is situated between Cullyhanna and Crossmaglen and lives up to all the standards in the criteria, should remain open?

**The Minister of Education:** Tá líon na rollaithe 91 dalta ceadaithe i Scoil Náisiúnta Anamar agus an líon iontrála 13; ach ní raibh ach rollú 34 dalta sa bhliain 2008-09.

Anamar Primary School has an improved enrolment of 91 pupils, with an intake figure of 13 pupils. However, it achieved an enrolment of only 34 pupils in 2008-09, of whom only five were year 1 pupils.

As the Member knows, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is the appropriate governing body for Anamar Primary School. CCMS advised that it has carried out a survey of the primary provision in the parish, and one of the options is to close Anamar Primary School or to amalgamate it with St Patrick's Primary School, Crossmaglen. CCMS is proposing to go out to pre-consultation on that in the near future, but it has stressed that the process is at a very early stage and that no decisions have been — or will be — made about any option until after the pre-consultation period has closed.

CCMS has pointed out that it is important to ensure that access to high-quality education for each child is set at the heart of any proposals for the future. At this stage, the issues involved are a matter for the CCMS and the school trustees to consider, and it would be inappropriate for the Department to prejudge the outcome of that process.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus go raibh maith agat, a Aire.

Will the Minister outline some of the criteria that are considered when assessing a school's viability? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Education:** Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Tá sé chritéir ann atá le breithniú agus inmharthanacht scoile i gceist; tá siad leagtha amach sa bheartas um scoileanna inbhuanaithe.

The sustainable schools policy, as I said, sets out six criteria to be considered in assessing a school's viability: quality educational experience; stable enrolment trends; a sound financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community. Those criteria are not meant to be used in a mechanistic fashion; each case must continue to be considered on its individual circumstances, but the overriding consideration must be the quality of education for the children.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for those answers. However, will the Minister admit that under her current sustainable schools policy, rural schools are, potentially, under threat of unnecessary closure? What guarantees can the Minister give to the House that rural-proofing will be a central part of the criteria and procedures for assessing the viability of any school?

**The Minister of Education:** As regards rural schools, my Department consulted with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in developing the sustainable schools policy. It was also assessed against the Rural Development Council's rural-proofing checklist set out in its report, 'Striking the Balance'.

The policy, clearly, incorporates school-viability criteria that are appropriate for schools serving rural communities. First, a lower enrolment threshold is applied to rural primary schools than to those in urban areas. Secondly, the accessibility criterion, and its guidance on home-to-school travel times, is particularly important in a rural setting. Crucial practical questions, such as whether the distance to school and the travel times for pupils are reasonable, or what transport arrangements are put in place, will always be addressed.

Thirdly, the policy includes a strong links-with-the-community criterion. That ensures that local community involvement with the school, and the contribution that the school makes to the community, are included in any consideration of a school's viability. I think that it is fair to say that schools that have been closed during my time in office have been from rural and urban communities.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Questions 2 and 3 have been withdrawn.

## Departmental Reviews

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of completed reviews carried out in her Department that have not yet emerged as policy.  
(AQO 2289/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Faoi láthair, tá sé athbhreithniú ann a bhfuil polasaithe fúthú ag céimeanna éagsúla forbartha sa Roinn Oideachais.

There are six reviews for which policies are at various stages of development in the Department of Education.

**Mr Dallat:** Would the Minister agree that there are, perhaps, too many ongoing reviews that have not been brought to a conclusion? I mention the special needs review, the early years review, the review of Irish-medium education and the review of the common funding formula? Does the Minister agree that while those reviews are not brought to a conclusion, and are not turned into ploughshares, the education system is sadly lacking in the resources and the knowledge that it requires to deliver equality across the system?

**The Minister of Education:** As the Member will know, we have wide-ranging reforms right across the system, and the reviews are very important to make sure that we have good policy in place. I do not agree that there are too many reviews happening; I welcome the fact that they are happening. I welcome the work that is being done across a range of issues.

The Member mentioned special needs and Irish-medium education: tremendous amounts of work are being done in both those areas, and I welcome that. We need to ensure that our education system is fit for purpose for the twenty-first century. Members will know that I believe that we need a lot of change in the system, and that I am leading fundamental reforms right across the educational system.

**Mr Cree:** Can the Minister tell the House how much her Department has spent on consultancy fees since the return of devolution?

**The Minister of Education:** I will write to the Member with the exact amount. I do not, obviously, have the figure to hand.

## Every School a Good School

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education to outline the main aspects of her Department's policy 'every school a good school — supporting newcomer pupils'.  
(AQO 2290/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá mé iontach sásta go bhfuil mo Roinn réidh anois chun beartas foirmiúil a

fhoilsiú a chuideoidh le scoileanna tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaltai nuathagtha.

I am pleased that my Department is now ready to publish a formal policy to help schools to support newcomer pupils. The aim of that policy is to ensure that schools and education and library boards are in a position to welcome newcomer pupils into their school communities.

I want to build on the capacity and skills of school workforces to support newcomer pupils, both now and in the future, as part of the overall raising standards agenda. In order to do that, the policy will be delivered through a broad, consistent regional framework at education and library board level and a flexible, responsible response at school level. My Department has funded the setting-up of the regional inclusion and diversity service throughout the education and library boards, and that will become an integral part of the education and skills authority.

The inclusion and diversity service is responsible for a range of work areas, from school-based support for initial parent-teacher meetings to follow-up advice on pastoral needs, basic language needs, curriculum support and an extensive training programme for school staff. In addition, my Department will continue to fund schools directly, via the common funding formula (CFF), for each newcomer pupil with significant language-acquisition needs. In the 2008-09 financial year, £5.5 million of that funding was paid to schools.

The most recent school census figures have just been finalised, and we have 6,995 newcomer pupils in our schools, representing a 23% increase on the previous year's figures. I have taken action to ensure that Roma children — who, as a historically nomadic group, face the double barriers of language and discrimination — receive a fair and equal education. Additional funding has been provided to schools based on the current reported number of Roma children.

In Ireland, we know what it is like to emigrate to countries throughout the world as a result of difficult times, so it is important that we ensure that children who come to this island have the best possible chance to integrate equally into our society.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Minister for her reply. She referred to the inclusion and diversity service. Is she aware of the concerns among educationalists that the inclusion and diversity policy is badly flawed? Will she consider undertaking an immediate review of the policy before it creates serious difficulties for children and teachers?

**The Minister of Education:** We will be launching the policy on newcomer children, and I will forward the Member a copy of the associated document.

**Mr Gardiner:** Will the Minister update the House on her review of the common funding formula and the steps that she is taking to ensure that funding earmarked for newcomer pupils is, in fact, directed towards newcomer pupils?

**The Minister of Education:** It is the responsibility of principals and boards of governors to determine how best to use their CFF money. As the Member will know, extra money per child is available under the CFF for newcomer children.

Tá na príomhoidí agus boird gobharnóirí freagrach as cinntiú a dhéanamh faoin bhealach is fearr le húsáid a bhaint as an chistiú ón fhoirmle chomhaontaithe.

We have evidence from schools that shows that they use money from the CFF in various ways that benefit their newcomer pupils. The Department has established a working group to develop good-practice guidelines for principals and boards of governors. Specifically, the guidelines will outline how schools should use their CFF money to achieve the optimum support for newcomer children. It is anticipated that the guidelines will be issued to all schools by the end of 2009.

The newcomer pupil factor is currently £983 per child, and we do not have graduated funding. If a child requires support to access the curriculum, the school will receive the CFF newcomer factor for that child. When the child no longer requires support, the funding will cease, which means that it is not given in the following year.

I have, and Members will have, witnessed examples of very good practice and integration with respect to newcomer children throughout the North, and I pay tribute to principals and school workforces, who are doing tremendous work. There is much that we can learn, and share, from that good practice.

2.45 pm

### Substitute Teachers: ELB Spend

6. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education to confirm how much each education and library board has spent on using recruitment agencies for the supply of substitute teachers for temporary contracts since September 2008. (AQO 2291/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Sna blianta deiridh, bhí titim shubstaintiúil san airgead a d'íoc gach bord oideachais agus leabharlainne le gníomhaireachtaí earcaíochta le múinteoirí ionaid do chonarthaí sealadacha.

In recent years, there has been a substantial decline in the amount paid by each of the education and library boards to recruitment agencies for the supply of substitute teachers for temporary contracts.

Since 2005-06, costs have decreased some 80% from £817,933 to £170,145 in 2007-08. In September 2008, the Belfast Education and Library Board spent £5,000; the North Eastern Education and Library Board spent £19,589; the South Eastern Education and Library Board spent £8,532; the Southern Education and Library Board spent £500; and the Western Education and Library Board spent £1,205. Therefore, £34,826 was spent by the five education and library boards.

I have asked my officials to write again to each of the education and library boards, reinforcing the position that recruitment agencies should be used to employ temporary teachers only in exceptional circumstances.

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Minister for her reply. She will know that it is a situation that I have been watching for some time. When will everyone be made to adhere to the guidelines that she provided in a response to my question for written answer on 3 December 2008?

**The Minister of Education:** I have outlined details of the substantial decrease in costs with regard to the use of recruitment agencies by education and library boards. I have written to the boards and expressed my strong concerns about any use of recruitment agencies; they may be used only in exceptional circumstances. I also note that there are big discrepancies between different boards, and we need to get as much as possible of the education budget into front line services. I thank the Member for his interest and perseverance in the matter.

**Mr Armstrong:** Will the Minister outline her Department's performance evaluation process for substitute teachers in Northern Ireland and the training and career opportunities that are available to teachers who are on the substitute teacher register?

**The Minister of Education:** Ón 1 Meán Fómhair 2006 níl cead ag bord oideachais agus leabharlainne ach múinteoirí ionaid atá cláraithe ar chlár na múinteoirí ionaid a fhostú.

From 1 September 2006, the Department has allowed the education and library boards to employ only substitute teachers who are registered on the substitute teacher register. From 1 August 2008, departmental guidelines have advised that all qualified substitute teachers who are paid through the departmental payroll must be recruited through the substitute teacher register. However, in situations in which no suitable teacher is available in the required time frame, recruitment agencies can be used to employ substitute teachers who are not paid through the departmental payroll system — although I have made it clear that I will be concerned if that is overused.

The primary purpose of those guidelines is to offer protection to pupils, schools and employers by ensuring that all substitute teachers are properly checked as suitable to work with children and appropriately qualified before they can work in schools.

The application process to join the substitute teacher register also includes checks that ensure that teachers are considered eligible to teach, that they satisfy relevant health requirements and that they are registered with the General Teaching Council.

Departmental guidelines also state that all substitute teaching staff who are recruited through employment agencies must have their names on the substitute teacher register, as inclusion on the register does not prevent a person from seeking work through an employment agency as well.

I will write to Mr Armstrong with further details on the training.

**Mrs M Bradley:** What effect will the shortfall of £20 million for teacher redundancies have in the situation of teachers who wish to take voluntary redundancy this year? What will be the knock-on effect for young teachers being made compulsorily redundant?

**The Minister of Education:** The Member will know that I secured an extra £6 million in this year's Budget to deal with premature retirement. She will also know that we are bringing our arrangements for premature retirement into line with the rest of the island, England, Scotland and Wales. We need to ensure that our young teachers have opportunities.

At the moment, I am working with the Department to ensure that the £6 million is used to best effect in line with departmental policy.

### Academic Selection

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of how long unregulated academic selection will continue. (AQO 2292/09)

**The Minister of Education:** I gcás na scoileanna gramadaí sin atá ag iarraidh teist aistrithe a fheidhmiú, creidim go nglacfaidh siad leis in am trátha go mbeadh a gcuid daltaí níos fearr as dá mbeadh siad páirteach sa chóras príomhshrutha oideachais seachas taobh amuigh de.

In time, I believe that the breakaway grammar schools will accept that their pupils are better served if they are part of, rather than outside, the mainstream education system. I am also convinced that when political colleagues see educationalists working within the Transfer 2010 guidance, which is aimed at delivering quality education for all children, they will realise that the old system could not continue. Perhaps, at that time, we will return to the issue of legislation.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sí.

I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she not agree with me that the situation that she has allowed to

develop is nothing more than an unmitigated disaster and is placing great stress on pupils, teachers and parents? Pupils are being withdrawn from primary schools, teachers are under great pressure, and children are wondering how many tests they will have to do. Will the Minister tell us when she will stop playing Pontius Pilate and take action to alleviate this terrible situation?

**The Minister of Education:** As the Member knows, we have a deeply unequal education system. We have a system that is failing thousands of our young people. I have given statistics in this House, but I will repeat them: 12,000 young people are leaving school without English and maths GCSEs, or Irish and maths GCSEs depending on what language they are studying through. That is simply not acceptable.

The Member's party claims to be opposed to academic selection — I have yet to see proof from its Members of their willingness to work with me in bringing about the changes to this deeply unequal system that are needed. Change is very difficult, but we are bringing about change for the vast majority of our young people. I am the Minister of Education for 100% of our young people. I brought proposals to the Executive, but two parties refused even to discuss them. Following that, I issued guidance, which, if adhered to by schools, will ensure that we have a smooth transfer in 2010.

I am surprised to hear the Member saying those things, because he was a teacher. No children are forced to sit tests. No children should be tested at age 10 or 11 and have their pathways decided as a result of that. I am proud to be bringing the necessary change to the education system. It is needed badly, and it is supported by the vast majority of educationalists, parents and schools. There are 1,238 schools in our system. Of that number, a small percentage is attempting to block change. However, I think that they now see that that is going to be very difficult. We must put the interests of 100% of our children first.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus go raibh maith agat, a Aire.

Will the Minister outline the equality measures contained in her guidance?

**The Minister of Education:** The guidance that I announced on 2 February 2009, if followed by all post-primary schools, will create a more equal system of post-primary transfer by levelling out the inequalities of the old system. That system has failed children from working-class communities, who are disadvantaged disproportionately as regards admission to grammar schools. One in four children admitted to a non-selective school is entitled to free school meals but only one in 17 children admitted to grammar schools falls into that category.

In the current school year, 73% of the children transferring from primary schools in Holywood — 77

out of the 106 children who sat the test — transferred to a grammar school. The figure in Hillsborough was 72%, and the figures for the Malone Road and the Stranmillis areas were 95% and 85% respectively. Contrast that with only 37% in the Sandy Row area and 34% in Poleglass and Twinbrook. Those are figures for the children who sat the test — it does not even take into account the number of children who did not sit the test. The percentage of children transferring to a grammar school was 22% in Rathcoole, and 26% in the Shankill area — that is, 10 out of the 39 children who sat the test. It was 20% in the New Lodge area — 16 out of the 79 children who sat the test.

For the first time ever, grammar schools have an opportunity to offer true equality of access to their provision — something that we should rightly expect of publicly funded institutions. In recommending that geographical criteria, such as parish and catchment area, be used in conjunction with the 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 nearest to them in each of the categories of suitable school. If followed by all post-primary schools, the guidance will ensure that, for the first time ever, children will transfer on the basis of equality, social justice and excellence.

**Mr Elliott:** Does the Minister accept that despite all her bluster, there will be pupil transfers from primary schools to the post-primary sector from next year, and does she accept the remit for that?

**The Minister of Education:** We will have to wait and see. I hope that all schools adhere to the guidance. That is the best way of ensuring that we have equality in our system and that all children are given a fair chance.

Thankfully, this year, for the first time ever, the primary curriculum will not be distorted. Children in P5, P6 and P7 will not be spending their time preparing for tests that they should not be doing. They will have the revised curriculum, and, like many other children across the world in Canada, Finland, the rest of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, they will be learning different languages, mathematics and science, and have interactive learning, which will keep them stimulated, instead of having some children sitting at the front of the class, preparing for an outdated test, and others sitting at the back of the class, filling time. Thankfully, those days have gone for ever.

I urge parents not to make their children do breakaway tests, and I urge schools not to play politics with children's lives by creating unnecessary tests.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 8 has been withdrawn.

## Schools Under Threat of Closure

9. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education how many schools are under threat of closure.

(AQO 2294/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá inmhathanacht scoileanna sa todhchaí le breithniú ag an údarás oideachais ábhartha laistigh de na teorainneacha atá leagtha amach i mbeartas scoileanna inbhuanaithe na Roinne.

The relevant education authority will consider the future viability of schools within the parameters set out in the Department's sustainable schools policy. The Department is considering six published development proposals for the closure of five primary schools and one post-primary school. I understand that the relevant education authorities are also undertaking prepublication consultation on three potential school closures.

**Mr Easton:** Does the Minister agree that it is sad and pathetic that the South Eastern Education and Library Board and her Department have not bothered to contact any teachers at Donaghadee High School with regard to their future — to tell them whether they are getting redundancy or what is happening — after her announcement of the closure of Donaghadee High School? Indeed, over 40 special-needs pupils will have absolutely nowhere else to go in North Down. Will she take measures to address those issues?

**The Minister of Education:** I will discuss that matter with my officials and reply to the Member in writing.

**Mr Dallat:** Given the fact that there is a fear among schools, both primary and secondary, that those arbitrary figures might be adhered to — causing a great deal of uncertainty, particularly in the secondary-school field — and given the fact that my former school is in the all-Ireland final for both Gaelic football and camogie this weekend, does she not appreciate that those schools are really special and need to be protected and not culled by arbitrary mathematical figures?

**The Minister of Education:** First, they are not arbitrary mathematical figures. I have explained in my answer to this question and the previous question that we do not just use the numbers: there are five other criteria.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr Moutray is not in his place to ask question 10.

## Free School Meals

11. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education to detail what percentage of free school meal entitlement children attend (i) non-grammar schools, and (ii) grammar schools which have declared their intention to operate breakaway admission tests. (AQO 2296/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Glacann gach Roinn comhairle dlí — agus cineálacha eile comhairle riachtanaí — i mórán mórbeart.

All Departments take legal and other necessary types of advice on major actions. Like all legal advice that is obtained by Government Departments, that is privileged. Therefore, I do not intend to publish the legal advice that was received in relation to that 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, 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”.

3.00 pm

## EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 1 has been withdrawn.

### National Development Plan: Financial Commitments

2. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether financial commitments to innovation and research in Northern Ireland, made by the Government of the Republic of Ireland in the national development plan, remain in place. (AQO 2307/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** I have not been informed that there is a problem with the Republic of Ireland funding in general, or the innovation fund specifically.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for his answer. The moneys from Dublin to the North under the Republic's national development plan are a powerful demonstration of how to position the island in the global economy — at the front line of innovation, research and development. I understand the Minister's answer, but is he talking to his Southern counterparts about how to protect current funding and explore future funding to help the island economy on both sides of the border?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I understand the Member's fundamental point. We all welcomed the assistance that was offered. Clearly, when budgetary pressures began to become apparent in the Republic, a number of people asked whether those would affect what we were doing. I consulted with the Department of Finance and Personnel before I answered

the Member's question, and neither that Department nor I have been advised of any forthcoming difficulties.

I was in Dublin last week and I spoke to my employment counterpart about a number of issues on which we work together. The Member will recall that we held the first all-island skills conference last October in Londonderry and Letterkenny, which was very successful. Before Christmas 2008, I announced additional help for a number of innovation projects, all of which have at least two counterparts in the Republic in relation to university consortia.

Combined with Science Foundation Ireland, that initiative constitutes a suite of opportunities for us to pursue joint research, and the Department is totally supportive of it. The announcements that were made before Christmas will produce an excellent research base going forward, which will be the future seedbed for a lot of jobs. I am very supportive of what we are doing together, and I believe that it will yield very significant results.

**Mr Armstrong:** How has the funding for innovation money been used for further education?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** We made a number of announcements about higher education before Christmas. In respect of further education, under the funding for innovation programme, 21 projects are being carried out by the six further education colleges in 2008-09. Those projects focus on college engagement with employers in priority skill areas, supporting entrepreneurial activity, and improving cross-border collaboration in the development of an all-island workforce.

We are considering proposals from further education colleges for year 2 support under the fund. Up to £3 million will be available in the 2009-2010 financial year, and a further £3 million will be available in the 2010-11 financial year. That is a very significant commitment, and I am absolutely convinced that the colleges will take it up with relish.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I know that the Minister has given assurances about the money from the Southern Government for innovation and research. However, if, for some reason, that money is not made available, does the Minister have a contingency plan in place to fill the funding gap?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I had a meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel over a month ago, at which I asked him whether he and his Department had any reason to believe that that money was not going to be available. He said that he had no reason to believe that. Likewise, when I was in Dublin last week, I was given no indication that that would happen.

Of course, we all understand the huge budgetary pressures that exist at the moment. As I understand it, the Irish Government are presenting a Budget on 7 April, at which time they will have to announce a significant number of adjustments to their national development plan. In those circumstances, I am unable to commit. However, there is no question of doubt that work on a number of those projects has already commenced — jobs have been advertised, and posts have been filled. In those circumstances, we would be faced with very significant difficulties, and, at this point, my Department would not have the money to proceed without the money that was promised through the fund.

Were there to be any changes to the budgetary conditions, I would have to take advice on the matter and look at it again to see what we could do. However, I have had no indication at all from any quarter that there is any threat to those resources.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 3 has been withdrawn.

### Apprenticeships

4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what priority he is giving to promoting apprenticeships to school leavers. (AQO 2309/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Apprenticeships NI is my Department's flagship programme to increase the number of skilled employees in priority skill areas. My Department works tirelessly to promote that provision, and that work includes the efforts made by careers advisers, as well as work carried out with careers teachers, social and community workers and the sector skills councils. All those people play a pivotal role in ensuring that school leavers are aware of all the opportunities that are available to them. A very successful Apprenticeships NI publicity campaign in August 2008 resulted in over 1,600 calls and texts to the Apprenticeships NI helpline and 11,000 direct hits on the website.

**Mr Lunn:** I understand that in Great Britain, the employers of new workers are entitled, in some circumstances, to a Government payment of £2,500. Does the Minister have any views on that, or does he have any plans to introduce such a scheme over here?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member will be aware that our apprenticeships target has been reached, with over 10,000 people in position. In the past few months, the focus has been on those apprentices who have been hit as a result of the economic downturn and on identifying steps that can be taken to ensure that they are protected. That involves payments and training being provided at departmental cost. Therefore, a direct comparison cannot be made between many of the schemes that we

run and the schemes in GB. In some cases, we are ahead, not only as regards financial contributions but as regards policy areas. Therefore, there is no direct read across.

It is clear that the lifting of the age limit has resulted in a very significant boost to the numbers of people taking up apprenticeships. Therefore, at this stage, I am confident that we are at least reaching a willing audience that is prepared to participate. That said, we will, of course, take advice on the matter. We will be guided, in large measure, by the sector skills councils and the responses that we receive from the various work development forums around Northern Ireland, through which employers can tell us about any shortcomings that they encounter in the apprenticeship programmes. We will then adjust our programmes accordingly.

**Mr Newton:** Does the Minister agree that there is a need to enhance the status of apprenticeships in the minds of parents and society in general so that they are looked upon as a path to excellent career opportunities? If the Minister recognises that need, what is he doing about it?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I agree wholeheartedly with the Member. There is a need to enhance the status of apprenticeships.

The response to apprenticeships has shown that there is a pool of people who are prepared to take that need seriously. Many people in business have recognised that the absence of meaningful apprenticeship programmes over a prolonged number of years has left a huge gap, particularly in our manufacturing sector. The Member has many years of experience in this field, and I fully support what he is saying.

We have a collective effort, part of which is the careers service. We have appointed 23 new advisers and implemented a pilot programme of putting careers offices on the high street so that people have easy access and no longer have to go through jobs and benefits offices. We are also making advice available in schools. It is a question of talking up the point — both in this place and in other places — that very worthwhile careers can be obtained through the careers service route.

The Member will know that a number of Northern Ireland's key manufacturing units — including a very significant one in his constituency — would not be here today had it not been for apprenticeships. That point is absolutely on the nose, and I hope that all of us will contribute to raising the awareness and status of apprenticeships.

**Mr O'Loan:** There has been more than a little consternation that Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) — a company that has made a £100 million profit from the Northern Ireland public in each of the past two years — appears likely to suspend its apprenticeship

intake next September. What discussions has the Minister had with NIE in relation to that matter?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** That matter was raised with me last week during questions on my ministerial statement, and I am following up on it. I visited the company's apprenticeship school and was extremely impressed with what I saw — it is an absolutely first-class operation. As I said last week, I would be extremely concerned if such a company were to go down the road of suspending its apprenticeship intake, because it would set a very bad example. I do not know the nature of NIE's labour supply-and-demand balance or the reason for their decision. However, I am following up on the matter, and I would be happy to advise the Member of the result of my discussions.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister think that there is a role for providers of adult or community education in helping people who have been made redundant?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Sadly, right across the education sector, people who have engaged in essential skills work — such as members of the Union Learning Fund — are losing their jobs. We are looking at what steps the Department can take to ensure that people do not merely fall off the edge, just as we have been trying to do in respect of apprenticeships. When someone has been out of work for six months, their chances of getting work drop by about 50%; when someone is out of work for 12 months, those chances drop by 75%. A very significant piece of work is required to ensure that a large swathe of people do not fall back into unemployment — unable or unwilling to apply for posts.

I support the thrust of the Member's question.

### Visit to Malaysia and Singapore

5. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the benefits arising from his recent visit to Malaysia and Singapore. (AQO 2310/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The visit cemented the relationship between Queen's University, Belfast and Petronas, the Malaysian-owned oil and gas company that is funding major research into green technologies at the university's ionic-liquids laboratories. Many Malaysian students and staff have chosen to study and work here, and, indeed, Queen's already has between 1,400 and 1,500 alumni in Malaysia. My visit emphasised the importance that we place on attracting international students and promoting international links between Northern Ireland and the rest of the world.

3.15 pm

In Singapore, I met the Workforce Development Agency, the Ministry of Manpower and the Institute for Adult Learning to discuss the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resiliency, which is a programme that we use, although it is slightly different in Singapore. I also visited the Institute of Technical Education and Singapore Polytechnic, which reinforced the benefits of the new skills support programme. That experience will inform the Department's review of the skills strategy.

**Mr McClarty:** I thank the Minister for his response. Will he confirm that much of Singapore's phenomenal economic success is based on education? Will he further confirm that Singapore still uses a system of academic selection at age 11 and that it enjoys almost universal — 95% — adult literacy?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member is correct. Investment in education in Malaysia and Singapore is astonishing. We visited universities, polytechnics and other colleges in which vast amounts of money had been invested. We have been rebuilding the further education estate in Northern Ireland, and a programme is ongoing to complete that process; however, the investment evident in those countries was breathtaking.

Those countries see education as a way of keeping ahead of the competition. They are in the eye of the Asian storm, surrounded as they are by China, Korea, Japan and Indonesia. If they are not up to the mark, no one will be. By coincidence, Boyd McCleary, the High Commissioner for Malaysia, is in the Building this afternoon, and I hope to meet him immediately after Question Time.

There is a clear link between education and the economic success of those countries and where they see themselves going.

**Mr Dallat:** I congratulate the Minister on his trip to Malaysia and Singapore. However, I recall that the last 1,000 jobs lost in my constituency of East Derry went to Malaysia. What did he learn on his trip that might prevent that sort of thing from happening in future and how will we apply it?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The irony is that Malaysia is losing jobs to Vietnam and Singapore; they are leaching jobs to other Asian countries. There is a circular movement of job opportunities based on wages, and Malaysia is not immune from that because its standard of living is high, its infrastructure facilities are well invested, and it is subject to exactly the same pressures to which we are subject. There is still cheap labour in Asia, but it is moving around. In many of the countries that started their economic growth some years ago, such as South Korea, wages are catching up rapidly with ours. Their main worry is that other Asian countries, such as

Cambodia and Vietnam, are beginning to suck jobs out of Indonesia's economy.

The main lesson of my visit was that there is no substitute for education. Mr McClarty mentioned the selection process. In Singapore, there is a process held at 11, and thereafter people are streamed to university, polytechnic or what they call initial teacher education. A further process determines later whether students take a vocational or academic route. Education, education, education — dare I use the phrase? — dominates thinking in Malaysia and Singapore. I met the Ministers responsible in both jurisdictions and both gave the same message.

### Redundancies: East Antrim

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to address recent redundancies in East Antrim.

(AQO 2311/09)

#### **The Minister for Employment and Learning:**

Staff from jobs and benefits offices are working with companies that have declared redundancies in East Antrim, including Ryobi Ltd, F G Wilson Ltd, Brett Martin Ltd and McNeill-McManus Glass Ltd. They have established multi-agency partnerships with the relevant borough councils to ensure that maximum help and support is given to all who have been made redundant or who face the threat of redundancy.

Recently, staff took part in a Positive Futures event in Larne, which offered relevant support and guidance to those who attended.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his answer. However, can he tell me how his Department is working with Invest NI to strengthen and maintain the existing jobs in my constituency? In particular, how is the Department assisting in improving training and upskilling in order to increase the competitiveness of those firms, so that jobs will be protected in the long term?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member may be aware that we have protocols with Invest NI, and we have regular meetings. As soon as my Department is notified of any possible redundancies, Invest NI officials and Department for Employment and Learning officials communicate with one another and discuss what steps can be taken. I assure the Member that, at this time, we are engaged in a very significant discussion about how to handle, going forward, some of the situations that have arisen in the Member's constituency and in others.

I can give the Member some examples. There are companies that are telling the Department that they have a good, long-term future and believe that an upturn is coming. They want to know how to keep

their skilled workforce together in one lump, because, in effect, that skilled workforce represents their intellectual property for the future. Between us, we are addressing that matter to see what assistance we can give within existing budgets. As the Member will know, we are not in a position to draw in any additional funds. We have to see whether we can reprioritise our respective budgets to try to ensure that the companies that we believe have a future have skilled workforces in position to take advantage of the upturn when it comes.

**Mr Ross:** The Minister will be aware that East Antrim has been hit particularly badly by job losses. Many of those who have lost their jobs are in their 40s and 50s, and we know that people in that age group find it particularly difficult to find new jobs and are reluctant to go into training. Can the Minister tell the House what specific things his Department is doing to ensure that people in that age group recognise the importance of getting back into training so that they are not left behind?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member is right. As I said in an earlier answer, if people in that age group do not find work relatively quickly, they are vulnerable to long-term unemployment. He is also correct to say that a number of companies in his constituency have been deeply affected. I will point out, however, some of the things that we have been doing.

Recently, officials and I attended an event called Positive Futures Larne, which was held by Larne Borough Council, and subsequent events are planned for Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey. In Larne, around 5,000 flyers were distributed and all those on the live-load register in that area were personally notified of the special events that were taking place. Those events took place, I believe, at a leisure centre, and were aimed at giving people the skills to prepare for work — such as creating CVs and doing interviews — and at letting them know what facilities would be available to them.

I assure the Member that the Department and Invest NI are working closely together and monitoring those situations. A lot of those companies are at the core of our long-term industrial future, and, therefore, we have a special responsibility to see that anything and everything possible is done at this stage to help them to survive and prosper in the long term.

**Mr K Robinson:** I thank the Minister for his answer regarding the problems on the jobs front in East Antrim. Does the Minister agree that one specific area that needs very close attention is the research and development capability that exists in East Antrim and which must be retained at all costs? Can the Minister tell me what positive steps he is taking to do that?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Member has shown great ingenuity in asking one

question when, in fact, he meant another. However, I will not try to anticipate that question. East Antrim is fortunate to have a major university campus at the University of Ulster's Jordanstown site. All joking aside, I know that the Member has been paying close attention to that.

Research and development is one of our top priorities. Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole underperforms when it comes to the percentage of research and development undertaken when compared to some of our major competitors. Therefore, my Department has been working with the University of Ulster.

In response to the Members who asked about the innovation funds, recent announcements were made that the University of Ulster was successful in getting funding for a number of those projects. In the long term, the research work in some of the new buildings that have been erected at that site will be vital for our long-term future, including for the built environment, biomedicine and sports science.

For years, Invest NI has been encouraging companies such as F G Wilson to take on a permanent research and development capacity — I am sure that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is more fluent on the current position than me, but I know that those are collective objectives. If this country does not have a major research capability, it will be very difficult to sustain jobs in the long term.

### Research Assessment Exercise: University of Ulster's Performance

7. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment his Department has made of the performance of the University of Ulster in the research assessment exercise. (AQO 2312/09)

**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 top-three positions in the UK in biomedical sciences, Celtic studies and nursing. A further seven subjects are ranked in the top 20, and just over 93% of researchers who were entered for the research assessment exercise work in disciplines in which world-leading research is taking place. The league table that was produced by 'Times Higher Education' showed that the university moved up 18 places in the UK, from sixty-third in 2001 to forty-fifth in 2008. Therefore, the university can be content that its performance was exemplary.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for his reply. To what extent does he believe that the improvements that occurred in research activity between 2001 and 2008

are related to the Department's investment in the research base?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I have no doubt that the success of the universities was assisted by the Department's significant investment. More than £63 million was provided through the support programme for university research and the science research investment fund. The Department is continuing to ensure that our universities have the physical research infrastructure to undertake high-quality research through a new permanent capital funding stream, which will be called the research capital investment fund.

In the past couple of weeks, the Department has been talking to the universities about how we will go forward in the next five-year period and whether any adjustments need to be made. We also have to decide what areas of research to target and where to put our resources. I believe that the results announced in December, particularly those for the University of Ulster, indicate that the Department's assistance, which was agreed with the universities, steered us towards greater achievement of excellence. The results demonstrate clearly that they have been successful.

### Redundancies

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with Executive colleagues in relation to assistance for employees recently made redundant by small manufacturing companies in the current economic downturn. (AQO 2314/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** At each meeting of the Executive I have updated colleagues on the measures that my Department has implemented in response to the economic downturn. That includes the support that my Department provides to employees who have recently been made redundant to assist them in finding alternative employment or to access retraining or upskilling regardless of the employer's size or sector.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for his reply. The best assistance for those unfortunate workers is to get them back to work. Will the Minister consider discussing with his Executive colleagues the higher criteria that were introduced recently by the Northern Ireland Civil Service for contracts, which has resulted in small local firms having to lay workers off?

If that could be done, perhaps further unemployment in small firms could be avoided.

3.30 pm

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I am aware of the issue to which the Member referred.

The answer to his question is that the Executive have discussed the matter briefly. The Minister of Finance and Personnel is responsible for procurement. It is clear that a significant number of employers have come to us and said that they are, basically, excluded because of their size or scale or because of other conditions.

In letting contracts, we have also had to look at the possibilities that exist for ensuring that there is room for apprentices and so on. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment may recall whether the Minister of Finance and Personnel intends to bring material on the matter to the Executive. I believe that he does; he has been lobbied by a number of people. Indeed, I have also written to him because I have received the same correspondence as, I guess, the Member. Therefore, I believe that changes can — and will — be made that will impact positively on the type of contractors to which the Member refers.

## ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

### Regional Tourism Organisations

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment has been made by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board of the role of regional tourism organisations; and to outline how their performance and efficiency is monitored. (AQO 2326/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster):** Regional tourism partnerships replaced regional tourism organisations, and they have a refocused role and remit to place greater emphasis on local product development, visitor servicing and industry capability. The intention was to develop a tourism structure that dovetails more effectively with Tourism Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), and to have one that is fully inclusive of the whole of Northern Ireland.

Regional tourism partnerships are independent organisations that are managed by their own boards. The current funding that is provided by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to the regional tourism partnerships is managed through service level agreements between NITB and each regional tourism partnership. I have concluded that there is scope to simplify and streamline current arrangements, particularly as we move to implement the new local government structures that are envisaged in the review of public administration.

I have asked my officials to work with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, local government and the tourism industry to present me with proposals that would: first,

identify any shortcomings in current structures; secondly, set out new agreements that align with and complement the new local government boundaries that are envisaged in the RPA; thirdly, promote more effective co-operation between all those bodies that are involved in local product development and visitor servicing, thereby enhancing the capability of the tourism sector; fourthly, ensure that the distinctiveness of our local tourist attractions and destinations is recognised and promoted effectively within the overall Northern Ireland tourism offering; and fifthly, to ensure that there is clarity about the roles and responsibilities of all parties in order to ensure that the best use is made of the resources that central Government and local government allocate for tourism development.

I believe that that work is necessary to help to develop better value for money and to meet the challenging tourism targets that are set out by the Programme for Government. I have asked for that review to be completed in parallel with ongoing work on the development of the new tourism strategy for Northern Ireland, which will replace the existing strategic framework for action. However, I want the review to be completed as quickly as possible — certainly, no later than the end of May 2009.

**Mr Beggs:** I declare an interest as a local councillor. Regional tourist partnerships have created significant new tourist routes, such as the Causeway coastal route between Carrickfergus and Limavady. Does the Minister agree that care must be taken when moving forward so that investment that has been made to date is not lost, that only improvements can result, and that such significant coastal routes will still have a place in the future of tourism?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with the Causeway Coast and Glens regional tourism partnership. I had a good meeting with the group. Clearly, excellent work is going on in that regional tourism partnership, particularly with regard to the coastal routes of which the Member spoke.

Part of the aim of the review that I have initiated is to take on board all the good work that is happening in regional tourism partnerships and to try to be more innovative and distinctive so that people have clarity on the delivery of tourism. It must be said that some confusion exists on tourism delivery in Northern Ireland. I want to ensure that that confusion ends and that there is clarity on the matter.

As I have said many times in the House, tourism is a key driver for Northern Ireland's economy. Therefore, there must be clarity about how it is delivered.

**Mr Ross:** The Minister will be aware of another exciting project in my constituency, namely the

restoration of the Gobbins path, which will be a great addition to the Causeway Coast and Glens route and will significantly benefit tourism in east Antrim. Will the Minister update the House on the progress of that project?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I am happy to do so. As I told the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, I visited Holland recently, and I met a journalist from the German 'Financial Times' who sang the praises of the Gobbins cliff path and was excited when I told him that there was a prospect of it being enhanced.

The Tourist Board has received a grant application from Larne Borough Council for the restoration of the cliff path. The proposal includes the restoration of the path to its original state from 1902, with improved access, a cliff-top path and a visitors' centre. The budget is approximately £6 million, with tourism development scheme grants of £3 million. The proposal is consistent with the Causeway Coast and Glens tourism master plan and is one of several proposals that have been received. Further information is being sought as part of the appraisal process. I am hopeful that it will be dealt with as expeditiously as possible.

**Mr O'Loan:** How effective are the NITB and the regional tourism partnerships in generating visitor numbers? The pound's low value in 2009 should give us some assistance, whereas the international lack of confidence will work against us. What indication is the Minister receiving about expected visitor numbers in the tourism sector in 2009?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Unfortunately, it is too soon to have any official record of that number. However, anecdotally, we have heard that we are getting a strong uptake from the Republic of Ireland. Some hotels along the border are reporting increases of 25% in visitors from the Republic of Ireland. The Department has been encouraging the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to sell Northern Ireland as a value-for-money place in which to holiday, and those bodies are doing that. I had the pleasure of visiting Germany with Tourism Ireland last week. It is marketing us not as a cheap place to visit, but as a place that offers good value for money. I endorse that view.

It was good to be in Germany last Wednesday after the weekend that we had had. I wanted to see whether there was any kickback from the bad publicity that had shot across people's screens in Germany and worldwide. I heard that people understood the situation and understood that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland have rejected violence and that, therefore, Northern Ireland is at peace with itself. They wanted to come and explore. I tried to give them all the message

that Northern Ireland is a good place to come to that offers value for money.

## Invest NI: Purchase of New Land

2. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the purchase of new land by Invest NI for industrial use, during the past two years. (AQO 2327/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest Northern Ireland has not completed the purchase of any land for industrial use in the past two years. However, the availability of service sites for development by its clients is fundamental to the future growth of the Northern Ireland economy. A key target of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland is that Invest Northern Ireland will acquire and/or develop 200 acres of service land in main hubs.

To that end, Invest Northern Ireland has launched the first phase of projects to acquire land in four priority locations — Strabane, Omagh, Armagh and Newry — where an urgent need has been identified. Past experience has shown that acquisition projects can be complex and can take several years to complete. However, to date, work is progressing well, and Invest Northern Ireland expects to achieve the target.

**Mr McCallister:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that land prices are probably at their lowest in several years, is the Minister content with her Department's land bank for future businesses?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Yes. We were pleased to sell off a large amount of our land. The rationale is that Invest Northern Ireland intervenes in the property market where there is evidence of market failure. I have identified the four areas in which we need to intervene, and work is progressing well on those sites. I hope to be in a position to make announcements in relation to some of those in the very near future.

In 2007-08, which was the organisation's most successful term ever in respect of property sales, 43 companies purchased 120 acres of land throughout Northern Ireland. However, it will not surprise the Member to learn that sales activity has fallen by some 80% in comparison to 2007-08, and obviously a key reason for that is the lack of finance available from banks to businesses in order to allow them to pursue their growth plans.

As it is at the moment, I am satisfied with the plans to purchase new land, and those plans are continuing apace.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Will the Minister outline the policy of Invest NI in relation to specific related industries and the creation of industrial parks and zones? Medical-

supplies industries could be located beside waste-management units. What is the policy regarding that?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I know the particular case to which the Member is referring, and it is essentially a planning issue. The Member will understand that, although I have taken representation from the particular industry involved, and have also attended a meeting with the Minister of the Environment, it is essentially a planning issue. All that my Department can do is support the Member in making his objection known in relation to that particular issue.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn.

### **Economic Downturn: Assistance for SMEs**

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with Executive colleagues in relation to assistance for small and medium-sized enterprises facing difficulties in the economic downturn. (AQO 2330/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** My Executive colleagues and I are engaged in ongoing discussions to consider what further action we can take to support businesses at this time. The economic downturn is now a standing item on the agenda for Executive meetings. Members will be aware of the £44.5 million package of measures announced by the Executive on 15 December 2008 in response to the economic downturn. That included the new 10-day prompt-payment policy to assist business cash flow.

Also, in my capacity as chairperson of the Economic Development Forum, I established a subgroup, led by the private sector, to consider what additional measures I, and Executive colleagues, could take. A number of recommendations have been made and are currently under consideration. Furthermore, Invest NI has established the accelerated support fund to offer clients targeted assistance, and a series of seminars are also being held for client and non-client companies, to provide advice on how businesses can respond to the downturn.

My Department and the Executive will continue to do all that we can to support businesses through this difficult period.

**Mr Lunn:** Has the Minister had any discussions with the banks specifically about the problems for small businesses in relation to cash flow and credit?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I have had the opportunity to attend meetings with the banks with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as well as the Finance Minister. As was rightly pointed out in this morning's debate on debt relief, there are

two issues concerning the banks. The first is in relation to the accessibility of credit to those firms that are seeking it — that is a big difficulty — but there is also an issue in relation to the management of current customers, with which there are also difficulties. There are reports that banks are unilaterally turning some business loans into personal loans — we heard of that this morning from the Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood. That gives a lot of cause for concern.

When those issues are raised with the banks they say that they are open for business and that they are lending, but I see a difficulty with raising those issues with the banks unless there are specific instances that we can take up with them. I appeal to Members, when they write to me, the Finance Minister, or the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to provide specific examples, so that we can take those up directly with the banks and challenge them on their behaviour.

I am glad to say that the banks are becoming more open to discussing issues with politicians. Their refusal to appear before the Committee for Finance and Personnel in the past was a retrograde step. However, I think they have realised that they need to engage with politicians, because only then will we be able to build the confidence needed in the economy, so that we can move forward.

**Mr Wells:** I am sure that the Minister is aware that there are many perfectly reputable companies in Northern Ireland that are not seeking extensions to credit lines, or extra credit, but simply want the renewal of their present credit arrangements. Therefore, I welcome her comment that if individual MLAs provide her with information, she can pursue the matter.

3.45 pm

There are two companies in my constituency that employ 150 people between them. Both companies have run into serious difficulty recently, simply because the bank wrote to them to inform them that it was closing their overdraft facility and to ask them to pay off their debts within three weeks. Does the Minister agree that that is totally unacceptable, given that there was no possibility of either company's defaulting on its loans?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Yes, I agree with the Member. The difficulty is that, although those companies will not default on their loans in the long term, they will not be able to repay their overdrafts within three weeks. That is precisely the sort of behaviour that we need to hear about directly so that we might challenge the banks. When we meet banks' representatives, they say that they are working very well with businesses, that they are offering them money and that they are doing all that they can for them. They will continue to say that until we can go to them with specific, fact-based examples.

We must be able to confront banks so that we can answer on behalf of our constituents.

**Mr Savage:** What help is available to people who want to start up in business, especially in manufacturing?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** As the Member will know, Northern Ireland's economy is 99.9% reliant on small businesses. There are 132,000 businesses in Northern Ireland, 99% of which are deemed to be small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Of those SMEs, some 95% are micro-businesses, which employ 10 or fewer people.

Contrary to popular opinion, we spend a great deal of our time helping start-up businesses to get off the ground so that they can move to the next stage of exporting. I want to ensure that the replacement programme that I will launch later this week for the Start a Business programme will allow start-up businesses to move to the next stage. At present, a gap exists between those businesses that are on the Start a Business programme and those that are Invest NI's clients. We must close that gap and be more responsive to the economy. I hope that when I make that announcement later this week, the Member will see precisely the sort of help that is available to start-up businesses.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 6 has been withdrawn.

### Broadband Access: Rural Areas

7. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether there are rural areas that are still unable to access cable broadband. (AQO 2332/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Broadband services over a wireline or cable solution are available to more than 99% of premises across Northern Ireland. However, a small number of premises — less than 1% — remains unable to access broadband by way of a wireline solution. Those premises are scattered across Northern Ireland and tend to be in remote rural areas that are too far from the nearest telephone exchange to allow a broadband service to be delivered via a wireline solution.

In such instances, alternative technologies, satellite and wireless among them, have been deployed. We have regularly monitored the quality of the satellite service, and on each occasion found that it met the terms of the contract. We recently awarded a new three-year contract to Avanti Communications Group plc in order to ensure that all of Northern Ireland continues to have access to broadband services. We will monitor regularly the quality of the satellite service provided in order to ensure that it meets the terms of the contract.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for her answer. She will appreciate that some of those, especially in the

business sector, who do not have access to cable broadband are experiencing difficulties. Although we appreciate the huge investment that has been made in broadband services, some of that investment may more usefully be directed to businesses in rural areas, especially those west of the Bann, that do not have access to cable broadband.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** That is precisely why we announced the new Avanti contract, which deals with that less than 1% of premises that does not have access to wireline or cable broadband, and that must use satellite technology instead. That contract caps the cost at £27 a month, plus a £70 installation fee. BT, at the end of the contract that it had had for the past three years, indicated that it would cease to offer satellite product, which Avanti will now offer when the changeover takes place.

I hope that Members will let my Department know of any instances of difficulties with the changeover from BT to Avanti Communications so that we can investigate.

**Mr Craig:** Will the Minister provide an update on what has happened to the broadband fund, which was introduced in August 2008 to help with infill in rural areas? I declare an interest, because, unfortunately, I live in one of the broadband black spots.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I never thought that the Member would refer to his home area as a black spot, but there you go.

The £1.9 million fund was launched in August 2008 to support broadband-technology trials and the delivery of infill solutions in rural areas. To date, two letters of offer have been issued, and there will be a further call for projects at the start of April 2009. It was announced in February 2008 that money would be put into North West Electronics to deliver broadband access in rural parts of west Tyrone. An additional £137,000 of funding has been made available to Avanti Communications, which has undertaken 3G mobile-technology trials in a number of areas, including Ballintoy in County Antrim and Ballinamallard in County Fermanagh.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the information that she just shared with us. I have had communication with the Department on broadband in my area, and I heard the Minister's reference to west Tyrone. In regard to east Tyrone, specifically the Ardboe area, I was trying to communicate to the Department that people in that area cannot get access to broadband with an adequate speed.

Will the Minister provide some idea of the timescale for the Avanti Communications contract, its implications for rural areas, such as those that I represent as a councillor, and the speed of the broadband that will be available to businesses once the process is complete?

Mr Elliott mentioned the issue, and access to a satisfactory and good-speed broadband is important to businesses.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**

The whole idea behind the Avanti Communications contract, which was awarded at the start of January 2009, is to ensure that the Northern Ireland economy, particularly our rural-based SMEs, continue to benefit from access to affordable broadband solutions. If that contract were not in place, people living in places such as Ardboe and Tamnamore, to which Mr Elliott referred, would have to pay for wireless and satellite communication. We are bringing in a contract, which is, essentially, a subvention, to help those people get access to wireless and satellite communication. I am happy to write to the Member about the speed of the broadband as I do not have that information to hand.

### Giant's Causeway: Funding for Interpretative Centre

8. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made in obtaining funding for the National Trust application to build an interpretative centre at the Giant's Causeway.  
(AQO 2333/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**

The National Trust has submitted a grant application to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board for financial assistance of £9.25 million for the new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. That application is currently being assessed. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment officials are proactively monitoring progress on the economic appraisal with a view to enabling a decision to be made as soon as possible.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the importance of ensuring that the project is moved forward, will she give us an indication of when she believes we will be in a position to, at long last, have a visitors' centre that is fit for purpose and matches the Giant's Causeway's status as a world heritage site and the premier tourist attraction in Northern Ireland?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**

I cannot be definitive on timescales, because, as the Member knows, the economic appraisal has to go through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as well as my Department, before being signed off by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. I am hopeful, and the National Trust has been in constant communication with the Tourist Board, even before it received formal planning approval. The planning approval went through in very good time, and I hope that we will be able to emulate that.

**Mr K Robinson:** I welcome some progress on the long-running saga at the Giant's Causeway. However, is the Minister aware of any further proposed developments in the immediate area that could assist in enhancing the attractiveness of the Causeway site as the premier tourist attraction in Northern Ireland?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**

I understand that other applications are in the planning system, but none has come to me for grant aid or anything like that. I assume that if some of those applications are successful, that they may well do so. To date, however, we have had no such applications.

**Mr Dallat:** I, too, thank the Minister for her answer. On this eve of St Patrick's Day, would it be in order to celebrate the fact that the Giant's Causeway is no longer at risk from speculators and their lobbyists?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**

If the Member is referring to the Seymour Sweeney application, which I may think that he is, he will know that that application was turned down. As I understand it, the matter is with the Planning Appeals Commission, and, therefore, I cannot say anything further about same.

### Euro: Benefit to Business Community

9. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment she has made of the benefit to the business community, in both retail and manufacturing sectors, of the strength of the euro compared to sterling.  
(AQO 2334/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**

Members will be aware of the significant challenges that local businesses are currently facing. The global economic downturn has resulted in a fall in demand for goods and services, locally and in export markets.

Recent movements in the euro/pound exchange rate have, however, provided some relief to local companies. That is a particularly important factor in cross-border trade, especially for the retail sector. Similarly, the exchange rate improves the competitiveness of companies exporting to the rest of Europe. However, it should also be recognised that the strong euro has led to higher import prices. Invest Northern Ireland will continue to work with local firms to help them to take advantage of trade opportunities in the euro zone and elsewhere.

**Mr Butler:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that, given the strength of the euro, tourism is an area that could generate the economy, with people coming particularly from the South of Ireland?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**

Absolutely. Indeed, PricewaterhouseCoopers' recent outlook pointed out that local exports and the local tourism product are more competitive in the current

climate. When I look at such forecasters, it is always nice to take something positive out of what they are saying. There has been a positive experience in retail in many of our border towns, and, indeed, beyond. I understand that Banbridge, for example, is doing very well at the Outlet centre, and the new, improved roads infrastructure has also helped.

As regards tourism, anecdotal figures have shown an increase in visitors from the Republic of Ireland. I am particularly pleased about that, because a lot of visitors in the past came to the Republic of Ireland for their holidays, and stayed there; they did not come into Northern Ireland. We are now seeing people coming into Northern Ireland, and that, as we all know, is very good, because once people come into Northern Ireland, they will want to come back.

**Mr Weir:** In addition to the positive advantages of tourism, given the recent changes in the exchange rates, can the Minister outline what additional actions the Department is taking to promote trade?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The Member will probably be aware that I was able to take the biggest ever trade mission to Europe when I recently went to Holland. That was a very successful trade mission, a lot of contacts were made, and I hope that a lot of business will be done as a result. I also had the opportunity to be in Germany last week.

Our exports are doing well at the moment. We have to recognise that the imports are on a downer, but over the next six months, Invest Northern Ireland plans to organise seven more trade missions and stands at exhibitions in the euro zone. Hopefully, we will see something coming out of that. I am positive about where we are at the minute, and I know that Invest Northern Ireland, and, indeed, Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, are working very hard to give us stand-out in those markets.

**Mr Gardiner:** Will the Minister advise, as a result of her recent visit to Germany, of any direct foreign investments coming in to Northern Ireland?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** As the Member will be aware, it takes 18 to 24 months to work on such foreign direct investments. However, I do not intend to divulge the contents of my discussions in Germany or, indeed, in the Netherlands. All I wish to say is that I am extremely hopeful that we will see some very good product in the near future.

*Adjourned at 4.00 pm.*



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# NORTHERN IRELAND

## ASSEMBLY

Monday 23 March 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

### ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Kennedy:** Mr Speaker, you will be aware of the marvellous sporting success that was achieved by the Irish rugby team in Cardiff at the weekend. Not only did the team win the six nations championship, but it won the grand slam and the triple crown. Will you give consideration as to how that memorable achievement can be marked properly by the Assembly?

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure that the Member will know that that is not a point of order. However, his point is well made, and I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure was listening.

**Mr Attwood:** I refer to the Hansard report of Tuesday 3 March 2009 concerning a debate on the Assembly Commission's engagement strategy. During the course of that debate, two Members asked a number of questions of the Assembly Commission in respect of that strategy. There were, according to my count, eight different questions asked, but not one of those questions was answered by the Commission member. On a point of order, Mr Speaker; will you make a ruling on the obligation that is on Commission members to answer Members' questions on reports that the Commission is proposing to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I assure the Member that I have read the Hansard report of that debate and I have picked up all of those questions. Letters will be sent to the Members who asked those questions. The questions may not have been answered during the debate, but I assure the Member that I, as Chairperson of the Commission, have no problem with answering the questions that were asked on the Floor on that day. Letters will be sent to all Members who raised points that day in the Chamber, and their questions will be answered fully.

**Mr Attwood:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that letters will be sent to Members who raised issues that day. However, it is three weeks since that day, and no correspondence has been received by me or, I am sure, by other Members in respect of that matter.

When Members stand in the Chamber and ask questions of a member of the Commission, is it in order that they are not only left unanswered at the time but are not even referred to?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I listened to the debate to which the Member refers, and I know that those questions will be answered. The Member has some problems with the Commission that he has identified very clearly. As I have already said to the Member, issues that were raised concerning the Commission will be answered fully in writing.

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### British-Irish Council Summit in Cardiff

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that the First Minister wishes to make a statement regarding the British-Irish Council summit that was held in Cardiff on 20 February 2009.

**The First Minister (Mr P Robinson):** In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and on behalf of the deputy First Minister and me, I will provide the Assembly with the following report on the twelfth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC), which was held in Cardiff on 20 February 2009. All Northern Ireland Ministers who attended the summit have approved the report, which I make on their behalf.

The Welsh Assembly Government hosted the summit in the SWALEC Stadium in Cardiff. The heads of the delegations were welcomed by the First Minister for Wales, the Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen. The British Government delegation was led by the Rt Hon Paul Murphy, the Secretary of State for Wales. The Scottish Government delegation was led by the First Minister of Scotland, the Rt Hon Alex Salmond. The Government of Guernsey were represented by the Chief Minister, Deputy Lyndon Trott, and the Government of Jersey were represented by the Chief Minister, Senator Terry Le Sueur. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Chief Minister, the honourable Tony Brown.

In addition to the deputy First Minister, junior Minister Donaldson and me, the Northern Ireland delegation comprised the Minister for Regional Development, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister for Social Development. A full list of participants is attached to the statement that has been provided to Members.

This was the fourth BIC summit since the restoration of the institutions in May 2007. The First Minister for Wales, Rhodri Morgan, chaired the meeting, which focused on economic and social inclusion issues, an update on the strategic review of the BIC and a report on progress in the various BIC sectoral areas. The discussion on economic issues was not on the original agenda, but we suggested that, given the seriousness of the current situation, it be addressed as the first item, and I am happy to say that our colleagues in the other Administrations readily agreed.

During the meeting, we each outlined the impact of the global downturn on our economies, noting the common challenges that each member Administration faces, such as trying to stimulate consumer spending and investor confidence in a difficult marketplace. We

in the Executive emphasised that growing a dynamic, innovative economy is our top priority but that, as a small, open economy, we are not immune from global economic events, such as the banking crisis or the rise in commodity and energy prices. In that regard, each Administration welcomed the lower base rates that have been announced by the banks and were keen for them to be fed through to local businesses and people, giving them lower mortgage payments, lower financing and borrowing costs, and increased access to credit. The deputy First Minister and I emphasised that point in our recent discussions with local banks, and I am glad that interest rate savings have been passed on to local customers.

The Council also discussed the measures that have been put in place to help to reskill and support the unemployed and those threatened with redundancy, while encouraging financial institutions to resume lending so that capital programmes can continue. The Council noted the importance of planning for the future to ensure that each member Administration will be able to emerge from the recession with the necessary skills and infrastructure to benefit from the upturn. Officials were asked to continue and extend ongoing exchanges of ideas and best practice in order to provide assistance to those most adversely affected.

Ministers noted that, at the BIC social inclusion sectoral meeting in May 2008, it had been agreed that the contribution of the voluntary and community sector will be the theme of the next meeting of that work sector.

The Council considered three key issues in its discussions on social inclusion and the contribution of the voluntary and community sector — known as the third sector: responding to the effects of the economic downturn; developing the roles of the third sector; and voluntary and community action.

The Council noted that the third sector has a vital contribution to make during the economic downturn by helping to deliver services, develop communities, and support the vulnerable. It examined ways of supporting third-sector organisations at a time when demands for their services will increase.

The Council also considered the role and development needs of the third sector. Although the independence and diversity of third-sector organisations were recognised by the Council, it acknowledged that the current downturn is likely to have an adverse effect on fundraising, grants and the competition for contracts. Efforts to encourage increased partnership among third-sector organisations were discussed, along with proposals to mainstream collaboration between third-sector organisations and service planning.

The Council further examined the support that might be given to third-sector organisations to engage and involve excluded groups as volunteers. Members

recognised the importance of volunteering as a means of encouraging wider active citizenship and community development. In addition, members examined measures that might be taken to assist the recently unemployed, and those who have been economically inactive for some time, to find employment. The Council noted the potential for member Administrations to influence positively the third sector's efforts to promote volunteerism by using grant programmes to develop opportunities for hard-to-reach groups, to promote best practice in the recruitment of volunteers and to continue efforts to strengthen the volunteering infrastructure.

The Council concluded its discussions by endorsing the forward work programme of the sector and noted the potential for mutual co-operation in the area of social inclusion and, in particular, in the contribution of the voluntary and community sector. It recognised that the current difficult economic conditions pose new challenges for the third sector and the member Administrations seeking to engage with it. However, it was confident that the sharing of best practice and experience through the BIC framework would be a positive step towards addressing those challenges.

The Council considered progress on the review of the arrangements of the British-Irish Council, which was commissioned at the summit of July 2007. The Council considered and endorsed an update paper containing key principles and details relating to the establishment of the standing secretariat. It agreed core functions, staffing profiles and secondment arrangements, and noted the general location information provided by the four Administrations that had offered to host the standing secretariat. The Council also endorsed the principle that the costs of the standing secretariat should be shared among all the member Administrations, and tasked the secretariat and co-ordinators with presenting proposals for sharing the costs at the next summit in Jersey.

The Council mandated the current secretariat, in consultation with co-ordinators, to convene a meeting to examine the start-up and running costs of the standing secretariat and a model for sharing those costs.

The Council agreed to adopt four new areas of work: energy; digital inclusion; housing; and collaborative spatial planning. The new energy work area will comprise two elements: marine energy, which will be led by Scotland; and grid infrastructure, which will be led by the United Kingdom. Digital inclusion will be led by the Isle of Man, and housing and collaborative spatial planning will be led by Northern Ireland.

The Council received an update report, prepared by the BIC secretariat, on the ongoing work of each BIC sector. The Council welcomed the progress that had made and noted details of the future work plans.

The next BIC summit will be held in October 2009 and will be hosted by the Government of Jersey. The subsequent summit will be hosted by the Government of Guernsey in the spring of 2010.

The Council briefly discussed the benefits of international student migration and agreed that it should receive an update on that topic at the next summit in Jersey.

12.15 pm

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy):** I am grateful to the Minister for his statement. A number of questions arise. Will the First Minister indicate whether there are any plans, or whether there is the capacity in the operation of BIC, to convene an urgent meeting of representatives of the devolved institutions to co-ordinate a collective response to the recent Treasury demands on the comprehensive spending review (CSR) in order to lessen any adverse impact that could result?

During the important and welcome discussion about economic issues, was the matter of the Presbyterian Mutual Society raised at the meeting or in the margins of the meeting?

Will the First Minister indicate where the standing secretariat will be based? As Northern Ireland is the part of these islands in which British and Irish identities are in closest proximity, do the First Minister and the deputy First Minister agree that it is the most appropriate location for the BIC secretariat? Will the First Minister and the deputy First Minister work together to achieve that?

In respect of the endorsed update paper that the BIC considered, relating to the establishment of the standing secretariat, is it possible to have details provided to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

**The First Minister:** In relation to the call for an urgent meeting of the devolved institutions to discuss the Treasury plans; there was a meeting of the devolved institutions in the margins of the BIC summit. It was hosted by Rhodri Morgan; and Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales met to consider those matters.

We then met the Prime Minister to discuss the issue. We made it very clear that the original intention of the Treasury was based upon the assumption that the United Kingdom would come out of recession during the course of 2010-2011 and that new and updated assessments suggest that the United Kingdom may well come out of recession later than that. We stated that the last thing that the Government should be doing is cutting back on capital expenditure while we are still in a recession.

Northern Ireland made additional arguments. We contended that we were not reliant on the funding

provided under the CSR — we were reliant on an undertaking that was given by the Prime Minister when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. When he announced the programme of finance for the devolved institution, he made it clear that if savings through efficiencies were made during the CSR period, they would be held here in Northern Ireland. We have consistently argued that with the Prime Minister and the Treasury, and we will continue to do so. I suspect that the devolved institutions will continue to keep in touch on those issues because we have a common cause.

The Presbyterian Mutual Society issue was raised during the course of our remarks at the summit, but it was raised more specifically during the course of the meeting that the deputy First Minister and I — along with other devolved-institution leaders — had with the Prime Minister. We made very clear our concern about the Presbyterian Mutual Society. We made it clear that we felt that the society had faced a run on its resources because the Government of the United Kingdom had propped up banks in the UK. That caused people to take their money out of the society and move it into what they regarded to be the safe hands of the banks that received Government support. We suggested that, in many ways, the Government were at least partly responsible for the Presbyterian Mutual Society's difficulties.

The Prime Minister made it clear that he wants in his hands the report of the investigation that is currently being carried out before he reaches any conclusions. However, he committed himself to talking to us again when the report is available to him and before he takes any decisions regarding what assistance, if any, he could give to the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

Four Administrations have bid to host the standing secretariat, and the Member will not be surprised to hear that one of them is Northern Ireland; the other three bids are from Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man. Ultimately, I believe that the decision will be taken on the basis of accessibility and cost. In both regards, Northern Ireland is reasonably well placed, with the closest challenger perhaps being Scotland.

However, all four Administrations that have placed a bid have made it clear that it is very important for them that a decision be taken, and that decision will be taken at the next BIC summit. Of course, we will continue to fight for Northern Ireland, but, as a number of Administrations have placed a bid, I suspect that the key factors will be the accessibility of the location for each of the member Administrations and the cost of locating the secretariat there.

The deputy First Minister and I are committed to working closely with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and we are happy to provide it with whatever information it wants

on the location of the standing secretariat. Indeed, we received a paper that shows comparative costs between the various locations and details of the flights and trains to and from those locations. The Committee will be able to make its own judgement as to which Administration will be best able to host the standing secretariat.

**Mr T Clarke:** The First Minister said that, after the BIC meeting, he, the deputy First Minister and representatives of the other devolved Administrations had a meeting with the Prime Minister. Did the BIC summit provide an opportunity for the devolved Administrations to prepare for that meeting with the Prime Minister? Furthermore, what other discussions took place with the Prime Minister on that date?

**The First Minister:** A discussion about that meeting was not on the original agenda of the BIC summit, but we convinced colleagues to table it as the first item. We probably spent more time on that matter than on any other single issue, which I think vindicated our decision to push for it. A lot of time was spent on each Administration describing the kind of measures that they were taking to dull, at least, some of the pain of the economic downturn.

Needless to say, we outlined some of the steps that had been taken in our December initiative, and each of the other Administrations indicated the steps that they were taking. We have asked officials to look at those various steps to see whether we can learn anything from them in order to move the matter forward. However, we all regarded the role of the banks as being crucial to our ability to come out of this downturn speedily, and we felt that the most important issue was the banks' preparedness to continue to lend money.

The deputy First Minister and I have had a series of meetings with the banks, and there appears to be a gap between what the banks are telling us about their willingness to lend money and the amount of money that they have to lend and the stories that we are hearing from businesses, farmers and others who are finding it exceedingly difficult to borrow money. We must get a better grasp of what the problems are with the various banks.

One difficulty — and this was mentioned during the BIC summit — is that a number of banks are starting to move back to their bases and to lend money in their individual areas. For instance, some of the Irish banks will lend more money in the South than in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Bank is now lending more in Northern Ireland than it does in the Republic. That trend usually emerges at a time of hardship.

That trend has emerged in the UK. Many foreign banks that were based in the UK are now not lending there. That means that even if the UK banks increase their lending — which the Government are pressing

them to do — that will not make up the shortfall that is occurring as a result of the withdrawal of foreign banks.

Therefore, banking becomes critical to our getting out of the downturn, and there is a lot more work that we must do locally with our banks.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas. I am grateful to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the statement on the successful meeting that was held in Cardiff in February. Of course, there was an even more successful meeting in Cardiff last weekend. I have written to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure asking that a reception be held in Parliament Buildings for Brian O'Driscoll, Declan Kidney and the entire Ireland rugby team, including the Ulster contingent.

Moving on to my question — *[Laughter.]*

The statement is very interesting. An méid atá ann, tá sé suimiúil. However, something that appears to have been omitted from it may be of even greater interest. I ask the First Minister whether there was a detailed discussion in Cardiff about the promotion of all regional and minority languages in these two islands. I understand that Rhodri Morgan, other senior Welsh and Scottish Ministers and Éamon Ó Cuív TD all contributed to a discussion about that subject at the meeting and, indeed, that it may have been a distinct agenda item. I ask the First Minister to give a flavour of that discussion and of the contribution — if any — of our Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

**The First Minister:** I am sure that we all want to congratulate the Ireland rugby team on its success. The previous time that the Ireland rugby team won the grand slam was the year that I was born. That shows the gap between the grand slam victories, but I hope that I will see such an achievement once or twice more before I depart.

The issue of minority languages was discussed at the British-Irish Council summit. The discussion was not the lengthiest, but there was considerable dialogue on the issue. The British-Irish Council group on minority languages is concentrating its efforts on looking at areas such as information and communication technology, data research and language-use surveys, and legislation and community development.

At the meeting that was held in the Isle of Man in October 2008, two new areas of work were discussed in greater detail, with a view to their being incorporated into the 2009 work programme. One of those areas was the issue of minority languages. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure intends to bring forward a strategy for indigenous and regional minority languages, and I am sure that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure will want to look at that closely when it is available. The Executive will be able to discuss the matter and develop a policy, which will therefore mean that

they will be in a better position to make a contribution on the matter.

**Mr Attwood:** I, too, welcome the statement. Given the useful comments that were made about the third sector, I ask the First Minister to look into whether Treasury guidelines permit the grant-aiding of third-sector organisations in order that that money can be fed to the community and voluntary sector to help with the economic situation in the North and, indeed, in all the relevant jurisdictions of the British-Irish Council. If that were to happen, money may reach more quickly those people who are in need.

I also welcome the British-Irish Council's agreement to adopt four new areas of work: energy; digital inclusion; housing; and collaborative spatial planning. Does the First Minister agree that the British-Irish Council's adoption of issues such as energy and housing in an institutional format provides a useful precedent for the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in that that body may be able to adopt such matters in an institutional format in the future?

**The First Minister:** I will look at the Treasury guidelines. From my period as Minister of Finance and Personnel, I recall the position being that Government can fund schemes and programmes that are run by the third sector — if they fit into the Programme for Government — but that Government cannot fund the organisations, particularly if they are charitable.

I will check the position and will respond in writing to the Member within three weeks. With the present recession, there will be a greater call on the services of the third sector at a time when it will be more difficult for that sector to acquire funding. The Government must face up to that conundrum.

12.30 pm

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

I welcome, as the Member does, the BIC's decision to take on those two new areas of work — housing and collaborative spatial planning — and the fact that those work streams will be led by Northern Ireland. The BIC sets a good precedent: it drops work streams that have done useful work and have come to an end, and then it takes on new work. The North/South Ministerial Council might want to consider that precedent. Rather than schemes being dragged out when they have outlived their usefulness, the NSMC should consider other useful work.

We are discussing the reform of the BIC and the NSMC. Although my comment is slightly tangential to the question, we must work very hard, in these difficult economic circumstances, to ensure that we make the most effective and efficient use of collaborative BIC and NSMC meetings. We should consider whether it is necessary to take along all our Ministers to North/

South Ministerial Council meetings, even if they do not have a contribution to make and agenda items do not relate to their work area. A number of improvements can be implemented to make the NSMC more effective and efficient.

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Minister for his statement on the work of the BIC.

The meeting considered a number of ways in which third-sector organisations might be supported, and it noted that the current economic downturn will have an effect on fund-raising. Rather than Ministers considering a number of ways themselves, they could ensure that potential support for the third sector is rolled out as speedily as possible in Northern Ireland. I trust that Ministers will give us some positive news on that.

I wish to follow up on Mr Kennedy's questions about the location of the secretariat. It is clear that Northern Ireland should have a good case for being the base for the secretariat, since the Council is a child of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Will the First Minister give us any idea of when there might be progress on that topic?

I note that Northern Ireland will take the lead on collaborative spatial planning. We had an excellent example of collaborative spatial planning on a small sector of the Millennium Stadium on Saturday afternoon, led by Declan Kidney. Will the first Minister tell us who will lead for Northern Ireland in that respect?

**The First Minister:** All Members are making an effort to comment on the weekend's victory, and the Member has succeeded in doing so. The collaborative spatial planning work will be led by the Minister for Regional Development, and the housing work will be led by the Minister for Social Development.

In relation to the third sector, in answer to a question from the Member for West Belfast, I said that the Executive have a responsibility to consider what assistance they can give — if not to third sector organisations, then to the programmes in which they are involved — to ensure that those organisations do not fall short because of a reduction in their funding at a time when their services are most urgently required. As the Member suggests, we will investigate what can be done as speedily as possible.

Northern Ireland has a strong case in relation to the location of the standing secretariat. I would not like to offer odds on it because each member Administration will examine the issue from different perspectives and consider how accessible the secretariat might be from their Administration. However, Northern Ireland has distinct advantages when it comes to costs. We can probably provide the secretariat at a lower cost than any of the other Administrations. The location of the secretariat will depend on accessibility from each of the regions. However, Northern Ireland has a good

network in and out of its two airports, which should assist us in that regard.

At the meeting, we expressed — as did the others — that we were making the offer. We hoped that other member Administrations would find it a useful offer; however, I do not think that any of us are going to die in a ditch over the issue of location. We may die in a ditch if that is not done as quickly as possible, and the decision has been made that we will decide the location at the next BIC summit.

**Mr Storey:** In his statement the First Minister made reference to work sectors. How many of those work sectors are live within the British-Irish Council, and in which of those is Northern Ireland talking the lead?

**The First Minister:** Now that we have added on the further sectors, there are 10 live sectors, three of which, I think, we ended at the Edinburgh BIC summit. Of the 10 live sectors, Northern Ireland has the responsibility for leading three. As well as the two that have already been outlined — spatial planning and housing — Northern Ireland will take the lead on transport. Those are three fairly important sectors, not just from a Northern Ireland point of view, but from the point of view of all the Administrations, which are very keen to participate in the discussions on those issues. I can provide the Member with a list of the live sectors; however, the Deputy Speaker may not want me to give that list here and now. I can provide him, and any other Member, with that list if they seek it.

**Mr Molloy:** I thank the First Minister for his statement. It is a very important statement, particularly given the recognition that the BIC gives to the third sector. Will the Minister further clarify that within the recognition of the important role played by the third sector, there was a recognition that those services can be delivered on the cheap? Was there any commitment from the Minister for the third sector to deliver services and to ensure that the much needed resources can continue to be provided to that sector?

**The First Minister:** The Minister for Social Development is very willing to give support to the extent that she can within her finite budget. She was present at the summit and she contributed to discussions on that item. It is her view, and the view of the Executive, that, under the current circumstances, we really need to pull out all the stops. The voluntary community sector is a very significant sector in Northern Ireland. It is judged that there are around 88,000 people already volunteering within that sector in Northern Ireland, which is a massive number in relation to the population of Northern Ireland. As I understand it, there are just under 5,000 groups within that sector. I think that we have a more developed community and voluntary sector than any other member Administration. Perhaps

they have more to learn from us in those matters than we have from them.

We are in an economic downturn, and that limits the amount of money available to the Minister for Social Development with which to assist the sector. However, on the basis of the discussion that we had on those matters, I am pretty sure that she will be looking at that as an area in which she will want to make bids.

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the First Minister for his statement. I note that in Cardiff, the BIC adopted an energy work stream and that the lead in that is to be taken by the United Kingdom Government and Scotland. Will the First Minister outline the potential advantages of that work stream, and the related isles project, to Northern Ireland?

**The First Minister:** There was some discussion as to who would lead that sector, with Scotland and the UK Government very keen to take the lead. In a classic compromise, the sector has been divided in two: the marine energy sector will be led by Scotland, and the grid energy sector will be led by the UK Government.

The high cost of energy demonstrates the importance of the issue to Northern Ireland, and issues flow not only from the marine and grid matters but from the use of renewable energies, and how to fit in the use of wind power, tidal energy and wave energy. The programme that was mentioned by the Member is clearly one of those issues. It is important for Northern Ireland, and we wish to make a full and robust contribution to it. The Administration believe that it can be of advantage to Northern Ireland.

**Mr Elliott:** Given the importance of the issue of child poverty to the community and voluntary sector, has any debate taken place on the potential impact on Northern Ireland that any future Westminster policy or legislation might have? In particular, what impact might that have on the Programme for Government targets and the comprehensive spending review?

**The First Minister:** As Members will be aware, the United Kingdom Government are considering giving a legislative basis to their targets in that area. That shows a strong determination that they intend to meet those targets. Northern Ireland's targets are very challenging, and they probably go beyond the level of those in the UK as a whole. We intend to continue to stretch ourselves to reach the targets that we have set.

Obviously, the levels of poverty increase in an economic recession, which makes it all the more difficult to achieve the targets. Just as the backcloth is one that is likely to lead to an upward trend in the targets, a corresponding effort is required on the part of the Executive to meet the challenge. That is one of the issues that the Executive are considering, and we have not lowered our targets. We may have to stretch and work much harder to achieve them.

**Mr O'Loan:** I welcome the fact that the First Minister sought and obtained the placing of economic issues as the first item on the agenda. I am sure that he will have noted that Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin have recently entered into an agreement on co-operation on innovation. That is a significant move in the current economic situation. What opportunities does the First Minister see for collaboration in the area of innovation, and does he see that as offering scope that our own universities and businesses can gain from collaboration towards enhancing the quality of their innovation?

**The First Minister:** Northern Ireland has a considerable heritage and track record of innovation. Some of the greatest innovators in history have come from Northern Ireland. Our universities are at the leading edge of innovation, and there are many collaborative initiatives between Northern Ireland universities and universities elsewhere, particularly those in the United States. That is to be encouraged.

Although Northern Ireland has the lowest unemployment in the British Isles, our pursuit of the economy as our priority causes us to look at bringing higher-value-added jobs to Northern Ireland in order to put Northern Ireland employment up the food chain. That takes us right to the heart of innovation, and that is why innovation was given the impetus of additional funding in the Programme for Government and Budget. That is why the Ministers are pushing ahead with innovation. We have the innovation fund to which the Minister for Employment and Learning, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and other Departments all make a contribution.

As regards improving Northern Ireland's gross value added, those innovative schemes will end up being higher value added. That is where the future really lies. I agree entirely with the Member: we want to encourage universities to strive further in that area.

12.45 pm

**Mr Craig:** British/Irish co-operation could produce almost instantaneous benefit for Northern Ireland in the area of mutual recognition of driving disqualifications, where a loophole has existed for quite some time. Has that issue been advanced in the work of the British-Irish Council's transport sector?

**The First Minister:** First, I must point out that there is, perhaps, one gap in the arrangements and structure of the BIC, which is that it does not receive regular reports from work streams. It does not, therefore, see the outcome of a work stream until the end of the programme. However, because transport is a Northern Ireland-led programme, we know a bit more about it. I am glad that significant progress is being made on driving disqualifications. I expect that in spring 2009,

which is not far away, we may have reached agreement on how to deal with those issues.

Apart from disqualifications, there is the issue of other driving offences being recognised by member Administrations. That is a more complex issue because the statute book of each Administration is different; therefore, an offence in one jurisdiction might not be an offence in another. Although work continues on that issue, disqualification is more likely to be dealt with first.

**Mr Bresland:** Will the First Minister update the House on progress that has been made to establish a standing secretariat for the BIC?

**The First Minister:** All the initial work that the BIC is required to do has been done, short of taking a decision on the location. In the background, officials are meeting to look, I suspect, at a matrix of the attributes of each of the four locations for which offers to host the secretariat have been submitted. As I indicated earlier, I suspect that the two key ingredients that will be considered will be accessibility and cost, although there are others.

On that basis, four Administrations have submitted proposals that indicate the nature of their transport links to each of the other Administrations. They have indicated the likely cost of setting up an office and of peopling that office. I almost said “manning that office”, which is not PC nowadays. All that information is now available to the existing secretariat, which will meet and make proposals to Ministers before the next summit, which, I believe, will be held in October 2009.

**Mr B McCrea:** Much of what the Assembly talks about in the Chamber is mundane and workaday. However, I am surprised by one issue and, frankly, shocked by another. My surprise — at the risk of sounding like Barry McElduff — is that at the famous victory that we had on the rugby pitch on Saturday 21 March 2009, there was no representative of the Government of Northern Ireland. I wonder whether there was some difficulty in getting tickets.

The more serious issue is that I was shocked — genuinely shocked — to hear the First Minister say that he thought that some major banks that have their headquarters on the island of Ireland are withdrawing lending or support to Northern Ireland. That is fundamental. Two of the major banks —

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

**Mr B McCrea:** The First Minister raised the issue. I wonder whether he had the opportunity to raise the matter with Brian Cowen? Will he or the Minister of Finance and Personnel take the matter forward? Frankly, the two big banks in question need to be on board to support Northern Ireland.

**The First Minister:** Nobody offered me a ticket to the rugby match or I would have been happy to attend. I will, perhaps, tout for one next time.

I made a broader point about banks. In times of hardship, banks have a tendency to return to their indigenous territory, which was the case with the Ulster Bank and at least one of the Irish banks, but less so with the Bank of Ireland. More importantly, it is a key issue for the UK economy as a whole, because foreign banks — which, until the downturn, controlled a significant chunk of the lending market — have systematically withdrawn lending facilities in the United Kingdom. Even if indigenous banks increase lending when foreign banks withdraw lending, it often does not make up the difference, and that can cause difficulties for business in particular.

**Mr Dallat:** Like other Members, I agree that it was a wonderful weekend for sport. I want to inform Members that my former school, St Paul's College in Kilrea, won an all-Ireland title at under-16 Gaelic football, which, relatively speaking, was as important as the rugby.

The Minister's statement is welcome and positive. I note that the BIC has selected spatial planning as a works base for the future. Will the BIC have an opportunity to visit the north coast, where there are some awful examples of spatial planning? Does the First Minister agree that the inclusion of visitors from Jersey and Guernsey will bring some positive ideas on how to not destroy indigenous populations through bad planning?

**The First Minister:** I am glad that the Member comes to the House after a weekend of celebrating various sporting achievements.

If the Minister for Regional Development brings the member Administrations to Northern Ireland, I hope that he chooses to show them good, rather than bad, examples of spatial planning. If not, he might not be allowed to meet the delegation in his constituency. Northern Ireland has many good examples, but part of the process is to learn from what other member Administrations have done or — perhaps deliberately in many cases — have not done.

The Committee for Regional Development can, of course, follow up on those issues and can fully consider spatial planning matters. It can keep in touch with the Minister for Regional Development and discover the lessons he is learning from other member Administrations. It can only be to our advantage to consider others' experiences in order to learn from their good and bad practice.

**Mr Easton:** What steps are being taken to ensure that east-west linkages are developed between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom?

**The First Minister:** During the current Assembly's lifetime, there has undoubtedly been considerable development of the east-west axis, and all parties have encouraged and participated in that development.

Aside from the BIC and the associated sectoral meetings, there are the joint ministerial council meetings, which, although they are not under the auspices of the BIC, contribute towards the overall building of east-west relationships. Furthermore, the deputy First Minister and I have been involved in several trilateral meetings with the leaders of the Administrations, and I know that the Finance Minister has attended trilateral and quadrilateral meetings with other Administrations on financial issues.

The east-west network is much more developed than it ever has been. In the past, unionists complained that the North/South relationship was developing at a much faster pace than the east-west relationship.

The fact that there is now a Scottish Nationalist Government in Scotland and a power-sharing Administration in Wales has led to much more independence of thought, and a desire to build up the east-west relationship. Also, importantly, the existence of a standing secretariat will improve that even further.

**Dr Farry:** I thank the First Minister for his statement. Returning to the issue of economic policy; is there an opportunity in the British-Irish Council to address the UK regional policy, or lack thereof, particularly in light of the current economic downturn, and to try to move away from the situation in which only three regions of the UK are net contributors to the Treasury, and the other regions are left in what is effectively a dependency culture?

**The First Minister:** Of course, we can make whatever contribution we want when the economy is on the agenda of the BIC summit. It was not on the draft agenda of the recent summit, and it was on the insistence of the Northern Ireland Executive, the deputy First Minister and I that it was placed on the agenda. When a subject is on the agenda, it is possible for us to raise any issue of concern to us.

We have to recognise that the funding received by each of the Administrations is based on the recognition of need in each region. The Barnett formula, which determines the contribution granted to each Administration, is built on that premise. However, a reduction in funding after a CSR period has already commenced gives immense difficulties to any Administration.

If, for example, there were a proposal to cut £150 million from Northern Ireland — as I believe to be the wish of the Treasury — that would obviously mean job losses in the public sector in Northern Ireland. It is impossible to cut £150 million from the Budget without it having an impact on jobs.

The Scottish Executive have a computer-based system that analyses the number of jobs that would be lost depending on the amount of money that is taken out of public spending. According to the figures produced by that system, there could be around 15,000 jobs lost in the United Kingdom were the Treasury to proceed with the planned cuts. There is a very united purpose on the part of the three devolved Administrations to ensure that the Treasury does not proceed on that basis, which would have a devastating effect on all three Administrations.

**Mr Savage:** A lot of our discussions this morning have centred on finance. Will the First Minister outline whether the Executive are continuing contact with the banks to ensure that interest-rate cuts are passed on to customers, and whether he plans to meet with the banks that have been mentioned this morning in the near future? According to my constituents, what those banks have been saying in public is not reflected in what is actually happening.

**The First Minister:** The Member's experience is in line with my own. I and the deputy First Minister have had meetings with representatives of all the banks collectively. We then determined that it might be more appropriate to meet the banks individually, and meet representatives at the highest level in each bank. We have had meetings with the Ulster Bank, the Northern Bank, and the Bank of Ireland, and are due to meet with the Allied Irish/First Trust Bank in the next few weeks.

At each meeting, we were told of the banks' great willingness to lend money, and that they have hundreds of millions of pounds to lend. Indeed, Members will be aware that the Ulster Bank was allocated £250 million for lending purposes as a result of the first tranche of the £3 billion share out in the UK as a whole. That gave us one twelfth of the UK allocation, as opposed to the one fortieth that we would have received had that allocation been based on population.

*1.00 pm*

The banks tell us that they have the money, but I meet businessmen and farmers every day who tell me that the banks are withdrawing and reducing loan facilities from and to them, and the two do not square up. The deputy First Minister and I intend to have a candid further discussion with the banks in order to ensure that the funding that is available to banks to lend in Northern Ireland goes out to the customer. I know that when it comes to commercial issues, a bank may well have a particular problem with a particular individual or company, but it is coming from too many sources for it to be a problem with one individual business. We will not move out of the economic downturn until the banks are lending properly again; that is critical, and we require them to do that. We will not build confidence in the economy until that happens.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### **Saving Gateway Accounts Bill: Legislative Consent Motion**

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

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Saving Gateway Accounts Bill dealing with the disclosure of information contained in clause 18(2) of the Bill as introduced in the House of Commons, and agrees that the saving gateway accounts be made an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Saving Gateway Accounts Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 4 December 2008. The Bill contains measures to provide a cash saving account for those on lower incomes. Its aim is to provide a financial incentive to save, through a matching Government contribution for every pound saved. The scheme will be open to people who receive income support, jobseeker's allowance, incapacity benefit, employment and support allowance, severe disablement allowance, working tax credits and child tax credits paid at the maximum rate.

There is currently provision for information relating to social security held by the Department for Social Development to be provided to Revenue and Customs. That provision is limited, and prevents Revenue and Customs from using the information for the purposes of the saving gateway scheme. The new provisions are needed in order to allow information to be supplied to Revenue and Customs for the purposes of identifying those who are eligible to open a saving gateway account. As this issue falls within the area of transferred matters under the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, approval for the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Bill must be sought from the Executive Committee, the Committee for Social Development and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The new saving gateway scheme would normally be a transferred matter. As the scheme is based closely on the child trust fund and is similarly designed to incentivise saving, it is to be made an excepted matter so that responsibility remains with Parliament in London. It is considered desirable to bring the Assembly's attention to this addition to schedule 2 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Executive considered the matter and gave it their approval on 12 February. The Social Development Committee gave its approval on 26 February, and the Assembly must now consider the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Saving Gateway Accounts Bill that deal with the disclosure of information to Revenue and Customs, which will operate the scheme.

The disclosure of such information will allow eligible individuals in Northern Ireland to be passported into

eligibility for the purposes of the saving gateway scheme and will enable people in Northern Ireland to share in the benefits of the scheme in the same way as those in Great Britain.

That scheme will give people in Northern Ireland a chance to save up to £600 and to earn up to £300 from the Government. It will also help to build a savings habit and will bring people into the financial mainstream.

I hope that Members agree that the scheme is worthwhile and support the motion.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson):** The Committee considered the legislative consent motion on the Saving Gateway Accounts Bill at its meeting on 26 February 2009. At that meeting, the Committee agreed, without prejudice, to support the motion, which will extend the provisions of the Bill to Northern Ireland.

The Saving Gateway Accounts Bill does something special; it encourages people who receive certain benefits to save. Saving is vital for economic growth and is something that our parents and grandparents did a lot of — I hope that saving is about to enjoy a revival. The Bill allows some of the poorest individuals in our society to establish a savings account; if they can put a little money, such as £25 a month, into that account and keep it there for two years, the Government will reward them generously.

The Government cannot often be described as generous, but paying 50p for every pound saved over two years — up to a limit of £300 — is, considering current interest rates, a fairly generous action. Based on the experience of the pilot schemes in Great Britain, the Bill's provisions are likely lead to more people developing the crucial habit of saving.

Despite welcoming the Bill, the Committee expressed some concerns. First, members expressed disquiet about the possible misuse of saving gateway accounts by money launderers. The Committee welcomed the reassurance that the Department provided about identity checks and limits on accounts.

Secondly, Committee members were concerned about the Bill's impact on local credit unions. Credit unions are the only contact that many people have with a financial institution, and they already play an important role in helping people to save. Naturally, Committee members wanted to see local credit unions playing their full part in the implementation of the Saving Gateway Accounts Bill.

Committee members were concerned that the regulatory regime for credit unions might lead to their exclusion from the saving gateway accounts scheme. It was agreed that that would be most unfortunate, and the Committee learned from the Minister that that was certainly not the intention of the Bill.

The solution to that potential problem was helpfully provided by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment — the implementation of that Committee's sensible recommendations on enhanced regulation should allow local credit unions to participate in this important scheme. Therefore, the Committee urges the Social Development Minister to work closely with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment so that the timing of the revised regulation of credit unions will match the introduction of saving gateway accounts. Under those circumstances, the Committee is happy to support the motion and welcomes the anticipated participation of credit unions in the delivery of saving gateway accounts.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I broadly welcome the Saving Gateway Accounts Bill. The proposed benefits of the scheme centre on formalising informal savings, promoting regular saving and getting people into financial institutions for the first time.

Saving gateway accounts would be cash based and would be offered to savers in a range of financial institutions, such as banks, building societies and credit unions. The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development mentioned some of the misgivings that members had about credit unions, but I think that a degree of reassurance can be given about that, in that account holders would be permitted to withdraw their savings at any time.

The misuse of accounts and of the scheme was another issue that the Committee raised. A number of protections will be put in place in order to deter the misuse of accounts. In particular, the only people who will be able to open a saving gateway account will be those who are entitled to and who qualify for social security benefits and tax credits.

The Government contribution was also mentioned. That contribution will be a maximum of £300 for each account. In order to obtain that, people will have to save regularly a maximum of £25 a month. The Bill also lists a number of penalties that will deter the abuse and misuse of accounts. A penalty fine of £300 may be imposed on a person who makes an incorrect declaration deliberately when applying to open a saving gateway account.

Although the scheme is welcome, ultimately people who are on benefits — particularly those who are on income support and who, by the Government's own definition, are at subsistence level — may find it difficult to save money from a benefit payment that does not really cover their ordinary everyday and weekly needs. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Burns:** I support the extension of provisions of the Saving Gateway Accounts Bill to Northern Ireland.

We must do everything that we can to help the less well off in our society. If we were to give those people a bonus every time that they put money away, they would be encouraged to save.

Members of the Committee for Social Development know about the pilot schemes that have run in England over the past few years. I will not go into all the details of those schemes again, but I understand that they were a huge success, because they got people into the habit of saving. People received a little bonus when their accounts matured, and they kept on saving after the scheme had ended.

The UK Government put a total of £5 million into the accounts of savers who took part in the scheme. I have no doubt that that was welcomed by the 200,000 people who were involved. Schemes such as those help people to plan for the future, they can help people cope with any unexpected money problems, and they could encourage people to engage with banks, building societies and credit unions.

It is my understanding that the Halifax provided the accounts in the first pilot scheme, but I think that the credit unions should be more involved — perhaps they should be the main providers of these accounts. However, that might not be simple to arrange, but I am sure that the Minister will explain that when she speaks again.

People trust the credit unions, especially in these times, but they do not have much confidence in the banks at the moment. The First Minister explained earlier the conflicting reports about banks that we are getting, and I have received similar reports from people in my own constituency. The names of some banks have been damaged badly during the credit crunch. I think that people would trust the credit unions more and would open saving gateway accounts if they were associated with the credit unions.

Overall, I think that the scheme is a very good one. If it were to begin in 2010, the first payments would be paid out to savers from 2012. In my opinion, the sooner that that happens, the better.

**Ms Lo:** I support the motion. It is very important that the Government provide an incentive to encourage people who are on a low income to get into the habit of saving, even bit by bit, in order that they can build up savings that will be of use to them at difficult times, at Christmas, or in the future when they can make good use of them.

As other Members said, the pilot schemes have demonstrated that once people begin to save through these accounts they continue to put money aside. It is also important to note that when parents begin to save, their children are encouraged to think about saving for the future by putting their pocket money away bit by bit. The Alliance Party supports the motion.

1.15 pm

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank the Members — the Chairman of the Social Development Committee, Mr Brady, Mr Burns and Ms Lo — who contributed to the discussion on the motion. Various issues were raised.

The Chairman of the Committee, Mr Simpson, and Mr Burns mentioned credit unions. As Members will know, the Bill provides that saving gateway accounts may only be held by persons who have been approved by the Commissioners for Revenue and Customs, and an approved account provider must be a UK institution that is permitted to carry on regulated activities under Part IV of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000.

At present, Northern Ireland credit unions are regulated by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). However, consideration is being given to transferring responsibility for their regulation from DETI to the Financial Services Authority; if that change takes place, credit unions will then be allowed to offer saving gateway accounts.

I am happy to write to my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Industry, Arlene Foster, to indicate that this matter has been raised by Members today and to see how quickly it can be brought forward. However, I must add a word of caution. It is possible that the process may not be completed by the time the scheme starts. Nevertheless, credit unions will be able to apply to provide saving gateway accounts at any time if and when the regulatory change takes place. Therefore, I can provide that assurance to the House, particularly to the members of the Committee who raised the matter.

Mr Simpson also highlighted the misery caused by money launderers. Once again, I assure the House that a number of protections are in place. In particular, passporting eligibility means that only people who are entitled to the qualifying benefits and tax credits will be able to open saving gateway accounts, because only they will have been sent notices of eligibility by HM Revenue and Customs, which will include a unique reference number. Under existing protections against benefit and tax-credit fraud, providers will have to follow the usual rules for opening accounts.

It is worth noting that the Government's maximum contribution will be £300 per account, and that in order to obtain that contribution people will be required to save regularly — a maximum of £25 per month — and to wait two years for their account to end. The two-year duration of accounts will give HM Revenue and Customs time to detect any non-compliance.

Mickey Brady mentioned the capacity of income support recipients to save. I fully appreciate that difficulty, because such people are on fixed levels of benefit. However, saving gateway accounts will be

open to those who wish to save. They will not be forced on people, and the amount of money that people save will be determined by them. The scheme is designed as a means by which to introduce non-savers to the concept of saving. Notwithstanding the fact that they will still be in receipt of benefits, it will afford them the opportunity to save.

In addition, I thank Ms Lo for her support.

I hope that I have replied to all Members' questions. I will pursue the issue of credit unions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, because the Committee's report offers Members a useful opportunity to build the necessary bridge. If there is anything that I have missed, I am more than happy to respond to Members in writing.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Saving Gateway Accounts Bill dealing with the disclosure of information contained in clause 18(2) of the Bill as introduced in the House of Commons, and agrees that the saving gateway accounts be made an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Standing Committee Membership

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on Standing Committee membership. As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. There will, therefore, be no debate.

*Resolved:*

That Mr Pat Ramsey replace Mr Patsy McGlone as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr P J Bradley:]

### Amendments to Standing Orders

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The next six motions relate to amendments to Standing Orders, so I propose to conduct the debate as follows. I propose to group the motions, as shown on the separate sheet that has been provided for Members, and to conduct three debates.

Debate will take place on all the motions in the relevant group. When all Members who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. I shall then ask the Chairperson to move formally each of the remaining motions in the group in turn, and I shall then put the Question on each motion without further debate. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

The first group consists only of motion (a), as printed in the Order Paper.

**The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow):** I beg to move

In Standing Order 9, leave out paragraph (2) and insert —

“(2) If, at any time, a quorum is not present and the Speaker’s attention is directed to that fact, he or she shall order the division bells to be rung. If at the expiration of five minutes a quorum is present, it shall not be in order to direct the attention of the Speaker to the absence of a quorum for a period of one hour from that time.

(3) If at the expiration of five minutes a quorum is not present, the Speaker shall, without question put, either —

(a) suspend the Assembly to a later time; or

(b) adjourn the Assembly until the next sitting day.

(4) Where the Assembly is suspended under paragraph (3), the outstanding business on the Order Paper for that day shall be, subject to any direction of the Speaker to the contrary, the first business when the Assembly resumes.

(5) Where the Assembly is adjourned under paragraph (3), the outstanding business on the Order Paper for that day shall be, subject to any direction of the Speaker to the contrary, the first business when the Assembly next sits.”

I point out that paragraph (1) of Standing Order 9 remains unchanged.

The issue with Standing Order 9(2), as it is currently worded, is that, in the event of the lack of a quorum, the Speaker has no option but to suspend and bring

forward the outstanding business as the first item in the next sitting of the Assembly. That has the potential to lead to a number of problems. In certain situations, it may be more appropriate to adjourn rather than suspend the Assembly — for example, if the business in question is near the end of the day or if an important event has called many Members away from the House.

In a worst case scenario, another example would be the lack of a quorum at around 2.20 pm or 2.30 pm on a Monday. That would lead to Question Time falling, because Standing Orders allow Question Time to happen only at a specific time on a Monday. A less drastic scenario would be a reduction in the time allowed for Question Time because of the lack of a quorum for a period.

Were Standing Order 9(2) to be used during an Adjournment debate, or in the last item of business, a suspension by the Speaker would be unlikely to address the issue of the lack of a quorum. Most Members will have left the Building, and a quorum would be unlikely.

Members may think that such examples are unlikely. However, in the previous session, the Division bell calling for a quorum were rung on a few occasions after lunchtime on a Tuesday. The sitting has always been quorate after the requisite five minutes, but there have been some very close calls. In one instance, a quorum was achieved with only two or three seconds to spare. The lack of a quorum after five minutes, and suspension by the Speaker of, perhaps, an hour, could seriously disrupt business and create the potential for some business not to be taken.

I will take Members through the proposed new Standing Order 9(2), which repeats the essential provision in the current version that, if the Speaker’s attention is drawn to the fact that a quorum is not present, the Division bell must be sounded to alert Members and call them to the Chamber.

That is an important provision, as votes cannot occur if a quorum is not present. There has been no change to that essential provision, bar a few grammatical amendments. One such amendment is the modernisation of the term “be present” to “is present”. The Committee discussed the issue of the five minutes allowed for a quorum to be present and decided that it should not be extended. Five minutes is adequate for Members to get to the Chamber. If a quorum is not present after five minutes, it is highly unlikely that it will be present after 10 minutes.

The proposed Standing Order 9(3) amends the provision whereby the Speaker has the option only to suspend the sitting to a later time and provides him with the discretion either to suspend the Assembly to a later time or to adjourn the Assembly to the next sitting day. The proposed new paragraphs 4 and 5 of Standing Order 9 deal with those two options in turn.

The proposed Standing Order 9(4) says that in the event of a suspension the outstanding business will be taken first when the Assembly resumes. However, the Speaker will have discretion in that area to allow for situations in which it would not be appropriate for suspended business to be top of the agenda on resumption. For example, if the Assembly resumes at Question Time or if a private notice question has been scheduled.

Finally, proposed Standing Order 9(5) deals with adjournments due to the lack of a quorum. In such situations, the Speaker will have discretion to decide whether the adjourned business is the first business to be taken when the Assembly resumes. For example, it may be more appropriate for the Speaker to adjourn if the sitting is near the end of the business scheduled for that day. The outstanding business will normally be the first business when the Assembly next sits. However, if an important ministerial statement is scheduled for the start of the next sitting, the Speaker has discretion to place the outstanding business elsewhere on the schedule.

That completes my outline on the motion to amend Standing Order 9. I recommend the motion to the Assembly.

**Mr K Robinson:** I support the position of the Committee on Procedures on this important matter. A quorum, or lack thereof, is essential if the business of the House is to be efficient and effective.

I register my support and that of my party for the positive changes that the Committee is bringing forward in this motion by proposing to amend Standing Order 9.

I draw attention specifically to the removal of Standing Order 9(2), which refers to the quorate state of the Assembly and to the insertion of proposed Standing Order 9(2) as shown in today's Order Paper. As I said, the retention of a quorum is central to the work of the Assembly. That paragraph focuses Members' attention on the necessity of a quorum and will — dare I say it? — keep the party Whips on their toes by ensuring that a quorum is always available.

When the quorum, should it be absent, has been restored following the Speaker's order to ring the Division Bells, the time limit of one hour before the issue can be brought to the Speaker's attention again is a wise move since that will surely reduce any temptation that Members may have to abuse the situation by seeking to disrupt the proceedings of the House.

The proposed new paragraphs 3, 4 and 5 of Standing Order 9 are helpful to the Speaker in providing him with that degree of flexibility and discretion to deal with the immediate issue of the lack of a quorum while protecting the business of the Assembly from undue and perhaps unnecessary delay. I support the motion.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr Storey):** As no issues have been raised, I ask that the motion be agreed to.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that motions to amend Standing Orders require cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

In Standing Order 9, leave out paragraph (2) and insert —

“(2) If, at any time, a quorum is not present and the Speaker's attention is directed to that fact, he or she shall order the division bells to be rung. If at the expiration of five minutes a quorum is present, it shall not be in order to direct the attention of the Speaker to the absence of a quorum for a period of one hour from that time.

(3) If at the expiration of five minutes a quorum is not present, the Speaker shall, without question put, either -

(a) suspend the Assembly to a later time; or

(b) adjourn the Assembly until the next sitting day.

(4) Where the Assembly is suspended under paragraph (3), the outstanding business on the Order Paper for that day shall be, subject to any direction of the Speaker to the contrary, the first business when the Assembly resumes.

(5) Where the Assembly is adjourned under paragraph (3), the outstanding business on the Order Paper for that day shall be, subject to any direction of the Speaker to the contrary, the first business when the Assembly next sits.”

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** We will move on to debate the second group, which consists of motions (b) and (f), as printed in the Order Paper.

*1.30 pm*

**The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow):** I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 18 and insert —

“18. MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

(1) Ministers shall make statements to the Assembly on matters relating to their official responsibilities, which may be either -

(a) oral Ministerial statements (see Standing Order 18A); or

(b) written Ministerial statements (see Standing Order 18B).

(2) A statement shall be oral unless the Minister considers it appropriate to make a written statement, having regard to, among other things, whether the statement relates to a matter of public importance and when the Assembly will next sit.

18A. ORAL MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

(1) The Minister shall deliver the oral Ministerial statement in the Assembly.

(2) The Minister shall make a written copy of the statement available to members as early as possible and in any event at least 30 minutes before delivering the statement in the Assembly. Where this has not been possible he or she shall state to the Assembly the reason.

(3) The written copy, whether or not embargoed, shall not be given to members of the news media before it is made available to members.

(4) Notice of a statement shall be given to the Speaker not later than, 9.30am on the working day before the day, or in cases of

urgency 2½ hours before, it is due to be made and the Speaker shall communicate such information to members as soon as is practicable.

(5) After a statement has been delivered in the Assembly a period of questions on the statement, which shall last no more than one hour, may then ensue. The Speaker shall determine the period taking into consideration the content of the statement, the number of members wishing to ask questions and the pressure of other business.

(6) Statements shall ordinarily be made outside the time bands specified in Standing Order 10(2) for questions and adjournment debates. However, where a statement is of urgent public importance it may impinge upon those bands. In such cases, the Speaker shall make arrangements for appropriate additional time to be scheduled under Standing Order 10 for questions and/or an adjournment debate unless, by leave, the Assembly determines to dispense with this requirement.

#### 18B. WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

(1) The written statement shall be delivered to the Speaker not later than 24 hours (or in cases of urgency 2 ½ hours) before it is -

(a) made public; or

(b) given, whether or not embargoed, to members of the news media; whichever comes first.

(2) The statement shall be included in the Official Report (Hansard)."

#### *The following motion stood in the Order Paper:*

In Standing Order 80(2), line 8, after "and answers" insert "and written Ministerial statements". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow).*]

The Committee on Procedures has been considering the position on statements for some considerable time. Although the Committee agreed that the procedure was working well, it also acknowledged that there was room for improvement, which comes in the form of three major amendments. The first increases the notification period — from the current two and a half hours, to one day — within which Ministers must announce their intention to make a statement. Urgent or emergency statements can still be made with only two and a half hours' notice. Secondly, copies of the statement should be made available to MLAs at least 30 minutes before its delivery in the Chamber. Finally, a new provision allows for written ministerial statements.

In addition to those key amendments, a number of minor amendments to Standing Order 18 mostly improve clarity and understanding. The proposed amendment provides for three Standing Orders: 18, 18A and 18B.

Standing Order 18(1) is a gateway provision that allows Ministers to make statements in two ways: orally or in writing. The Committee proposes to move away from the definition in the current Standing Order:

"A member of the Executive Committee shall make statements to the Assembly on matters for which the Executive Committee is responsible."

The amendment simply uses the word "Minister", which is much more straightforward. That still covers

the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and departmental Ministers by relying on the definition in section 7(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998:

"In this Act 'Minister', unless the context otherwise requires, means the First Minister, the deputy First Minister or a Northern Ireland Minister."

However, as in the current version, use of the term "Minister" does not allow for junior Ministers to make statements. The Committee discussed that possibility but decided against it, mainly because it could be regarded as diminishing the roles of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

Standing Order 18(2) makes it clear that a statement should be made orally unless it is of lesser public importance or if the information must be made available as soon as possible: for example, during recess or in an emergency.

Standing Order 18A deals with oral statements. Paragraph 1 is straightforward and provides that oral statements be delivered in the Assembly. Paragraph 2 is a new provision and allows that Ministers shall make a copy of the statement available to MLAs as early as possible and, in any event, at least 30 minutes before delivery in the Chamber. Where that is not possible, the Minister should explain why.

The Committee on Procedures considered that the early provision of copies of the statements to Members would enable them to digest the information and prepare appropriate questions. However, there is a fine line between providing the information too late and too early — the latter could result in its being leaked to the press and appearing on the news before the Minister has been able to deliver the statement to the Assembly.

The Committee also took into account a presentation from media representatives who said that important statements often received no coverage simply because the media had not been forewarned. Paragraph 2, therefore, is written in such a way that it allows the media to access a copy of the statement at the same time as Members. In the Committee's opinion, that is a good compromise; it gives MLAs time to prepare questions, and it ensures that the contents of a statement are not widely disseminated before its delivery in a plenary session.

Standing Order 18A(4) is a new provision, whereby notice of a statement must be given to the Speaker one day in advance. When a Minister wishes to make a statement on a Monday, he or she should give notice to that effect by 9.30 am on the preceding Friday. The rationale for that provision is that one of the most frequent complaints of Members, media and the public was that no notice was given of oral statements, despite important — even critical — policy decisions often being announced through such means.

Statements do not appear on the Order Paper, and, although the indicative timings paper will include statements, that paper is not widely available outside Parliament Buildings. Therefore, very few people know when a statement is going to be made. Our business must be public business, and the Committee considered that that lack of awareness and information was a weakness that needed to be addressed.

In recommending the new provision, the Committee examined a random sample of 10 statements over a period of some months. It found that, with the exception of urgent statements, most statements could have been programmed well in advance, and there would have been no hardship or major difficulties caused to Ministers in providing increased notice.

Increased notice of a statement will not only provide Members and parties with adequate time to prepare for the statement, but it will help to inform interest groups and the general public who can then attend plenary sittings if they so wish. Although notice of the statement will not appear on the Order Paper, notification will appear on the front page of the Assembly's website. That, at least, will provide some public and media notification. Provision for urgent statements remains at two-and-a-half hours, which allows for Ministers to respond to urgent or emergency situations, such as flooding or an emerging event.

Moving on to the final part of Standing Order 18A, Members will note that paragraphs (5) and (6) are slightly different from the current version. There has been some rewording for clarity and to provide for easier understanding, but the substance and policy of the two paragraphs remain unchanged.

I will now deal with the new Standing Order for written ministerial statements. The Committee took considerable care during its consideration of whether written statements should be allowed, to ensure that such statements would not be used by Ministers as an excuse not to make an oral statement. The evidence gathered by the Committee during its consideration was published in a short report and made available to all MLAs some time ago. It outlines how the Executive, through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, asked that the Assembly's Standing Orders also allow for written statements.

While acknowledging the role of oral statements, the First Minister and deputy First Minister indicated that there are likely to be occasions when the Executive and individual Ministers will wish to bring matters to the attention of the Assembly, which, by their nature, may not require the same degree of direct ministerial involvement or time commitment as an oral statement. It was suggested that such matters could be dealt with by means of a procedure for written statements.

The Committee was given an understanding that written statements would not be used as an alternative to oral statements and would be used only in certain circumstances, such as: advising the Assembly of Executive decisions that may need to be made public before the next Assembly sitting; the launch of policy consultations or legislative proposals; the outcome of consultation exercises; the intention of Ministers to make visits outside Northern Ireland; the publication of departmental and agency reports or corporate and business plans; and announcements of some public appointments.

After detailed consideration, the Committee agreed that the facility for written ministerial statements would be a useful mechanism, particularly as it could be used by Ministers during recess. The Committee considered that allowing for written ministerial statements would significantly increase the range and frequency of information available to Members.

At the end of its consideration, the Committee decided that the written procedure would allow the Assembly to be informed and to be given its rightful place, and it would formalise, to a certain extent, something that was already happening in an ad hoc way.

The Standing Order for written statements is short and to the point. It outlines that a written statement must be delivered to the Speaker no later than 24 hours before it is made public, and given to members of the news media regardless of whether or not it is embargoed. The statement will be included in the Official Report. Members will receive a copy of the statement in a number of ways. It will be placed in their pigeonholes, and notice of receipt of the statement will be sent to them electronically. That will allow Members to have access to the statement even if they are not in the Building.

There is one amendment consequential to the proposed amendment of Standing Order 18. That is Standing Order 80, which deals with the Official Report. Paragraph 2 of that Standing Order deals with the Bound Volume which holds the Hansard reports for all Assembly sittings, the legislative proceedings of Committee meetings and written answers to questions. It is proposed that that Bound Volume will now also contain the written ministerial statements.

That completes the outline of the proposed amendments to Standing Order 18 and the consequential amendment to Standing Order 80. I recommend the amendments to the House, and look forward to hearing the comments of Members.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chathaoirleach as an obair a rinne sí. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures for steering the Committee through the proposed changes outlined today. I am sure

that I speak on behalf of all members of that Committee when I say that he carried out that work very well. I also thank the Committee Clerk and her staff for their professionalism and patience, which were of equal excellence.

The proposed changes — particularly those relating to written ministerial statements — are designed to improve the efficiency and accountability of the Assembly, and to bring clarity to Standing Orders. Therefore, Sinn Féin supports the proposed changes.

**Mr O’Loan:** I also extend my compliments to the Chairperson and staff of the Committee on Procedures, and welcome the creation of a facility for written ministerial statements. Any concerns that Members may have are expressed in the proposed amendment to Standing Order 18, in that it should be the norm for ministerial statements to be made orally, provided Ministers respect the need to come to the House with oral statements on which they can be questioned. Clearly, there may be occasions — both during recess and when the Assembly is sitting — when it may not be necessary or appropriate for a statement to be brought to the Chamber and a Minister to answer questions on it. In such cases, this will be an additional source of information for Members on the intentions of a Minister. In that respect, I support the proposal and hope that it will not be abused by any Minister.

In relation to oral ministerial statements, I welcome the proposal that a written copy of an intended oral statement be available to Members at least 30 minutes before a Minister is due to speak — again, with exceptions being made for unexpected circumstances. I also welcome the fact that the notice period given to the Speaker will be considerably earlier than is the norm at the moment. The more information that can be given to Members by placing matters in the Order Paper, or in the indicative timings, the better.

Furthermore, that proposed change will also be of benefit in getting information about the Assembly to the public. We recognise the duty that we have to make the business of the Assembly more comprehensible to the public, and we have a Director of Outreach — not outrage — and Engagement. This is something that he will take under his notice. I do not think that we do enough to make the business of the Assembly sufficiently comprehensible to the public; that was a point that arose in one of the Assembly roadshows that I participated in recently. The fact that oral ministerial statements will be made available to the Speaker earlier provides an opportunity for that to be made clear to the public earlier. I welcome the proposed amendments to Standing Orders.

**Lord Browne:** I would also like to thank the Chairman of the Committee on Procedures and the Committee staff for their dedication in drawing up the

proposed amendments. It was a very complicated and time-consuming task, but there is no doubt that the proposed amendments will help to clarify matters and assist the Assembly in the smooth running of its business.

Secondly, I refer to the proposal to amend Standing Order 18. It is of immense importance that Members receive written copies of Ministers’ statements as soon as it is possible and practicable for a Minister to so provide. It is to be welcomed that Members will receive a written copy of a ministerial statement at least 30 minutes before the Minister rises in the House to deliver that statement. That will assist Members in their preparation for discussion of the statement. However, one must accept that there may be occasions when that will not be possible, and I welcome the fact that the Minister has to inform the House of the reasons that that will not be possible.

*1.45 pm*

It should also be noted that, regardless of whether there is an embargo, written copies of Ministers’ statements should not be given to members of the news media before it is made available to Assembly Members. I recognise that it will be given to both parties at the same time. That will be effective, because it will keep the public better informed, and they will be able to take part in the debate. I welcome that change.

I also welcome the fact that notice of a statement will be given to the Speaker not later than 9.30 am on the working day before it is due to be made and that the Speaker will communicate such information to Members as soon as is practicable.

Standing Order 18A(5) states that a maximum of one hour should be allowed for questions, following the Minister’s delivery of a statement to the House. I am glad that the Speaker will determine the period by taking into account the content of the statement, the number of Members who wish to participate and, of course, the pressure of other business.

Standing Order 18A(6) recommends:

“Statements shall ordinarily be made outside the time bands specified in Standing Order 10(2) for questions and adjournment debates. However, where a statement is of urgent public importance it may impinge upon those bands. In such cases, the Speaker shall make arrangements for appropriate additional time to be scheduled under Standing Order 10 for questions and/or an adjournment debate unless, by leave, the Assembly determines to dispense with this requirement.”

I welcome the proposal in Standing Order 18B:

“The written statement shall be delivered to the Speaker not later than 24 hours (or in cases of urgency 2½ hours) before it is —

(a) made public; or

(b) given, whether or not embargoed, to members of the news media;

whichever comes first.”

I support the motions to amend.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that motions to amend Standing Orders require cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

Leave out Standing Order 18 and insert —

**“18. MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

(1) Ministers shall make statements to the Assembly on matters relating to their official responsibilities, which may be either —

- (a) oral Ministerial statements (see Standing Order 18A); or
- (b) written Ministerial statements (see Standing Order 18B).

(2) A statement shall be oral unless the Minister considers it appropriate to make a written statement, having regard to, among other things, whether the statement relates to a matter of public importance and when the Assembly will next sit.

**18A. ORAL MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

(1) The Minister shall deliver the oral Ministerial statement in the Assembly.

(2) The Minister shall make a written copy of the statement available to members as early as possible and in any event at least 30 minutes before delivering the statement in the Assembly. Where this has not been possible he or she shall state to the Assembly the reason.

(3) The written copy, whether or not embargoed, shall not be given to members of the news media before it is made available to members.

(4) Notice of a statement shall be given to the Speaker not later than, 9.30am on the working day before the day, or in cases of urgency 2½ hours before, it is due to be made and the Speaker shall communicate such information to members as soon as is practicable.

(5) After a statement has been delivered in the Assembly a period of questions on the statement, which shall last no more than one hour, may then ensue. The Speaker shall determine the period taking into consideration the content of the statement, the number of members wishing to ask questions and the pressure of other business.

(6) Statements shall ordinarily be made outside the time bands specified in Standing Order 10(2) for questions and adjournment debates. However, where a statement is of urgent public importance it may impinge upon those bands. In such cases, the Speaker shall make arrangements for appropriate additional time to be scheduled under Standing Order 10 for questions and/or an adjournment debate unless, by leave, the Assembly determines to dispense with this requirement.

**18B. WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

(1) The written statement shall be delivered to the Speaker not later than 24 hours (or in cases of urgency 2 ½ hours) before it is —

- (a) made public; or
  - (b) given, whether or not embargoed, to members of the news media;
- whichever comes first.

(2) The statement shall be included in the Official Report (Hansard).”

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

In Standing Order 80(2), line 8, after “and answers” insert “and written Ministerial statements”.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** We now come to the debate on the third group, which consists of motions (e), (c) and (d), as printed in the Order Paper.

**The Chairperson of the Committee on**

**Procedures:** I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 27 and insert —

**“27. VOTING — DIVISIONS**

(1) The Speaker shall direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded if —

- (a) he or she is unsure whether or not a question is carried following the collection of voices under Standing Order 26; or
- (b) his or her judgement as to whether a question is so carried is challenged.

(2) Three minutes after this direction, the Speaker shall put the question again, and if paragraph (1)(a) or (b) still applies, he or she shall proceed as set out below. Otherwise he or she shall judge whether the question be carried in accordance with Standing Order 26(3).

(3) If, in the Speaker’s opinion, his or her judgement is unnecessarily challenged, he or she may take the vote of the Assembly by calling upon the members who support and who challenge his or her judgement successively to rise in their places and he or she shall thereupon, as he or she thinks fit, declare the determination of the Assembly without proceeding as set out below.

(4) The Speaker shall call for the nomination of two tellers for each side of the question but, if within a reasonable time after this call —

(a) two tellers for one side but not the other have been nominated, the determination of the Assembly shall be that of the side which has nominated the two tellers;

(b) two tellers for each side have not been nominated, the question shall not be carried.

(5) After tellers have been nominated, the Speaker shall direct the Assembly to divide, ‘ayes’ to the right and ‘noes’ to the left, and that the division bells be again sounded.

(6) Four minutes after this direction, the Speaker shall direct that the doors from the corridors to the Chamber and lobbies are secured.

(7) When all members in the lobbies have voted, the tellers shall bring the division lists to the table clerks who will announce the result.

(8) A member may vote in a division although he or she did not hear the question put.

(9) A member shall not be obliged to vote.

(10) If the votes in a division are equal the question shall not be carried.

(11) If any member is present within the precincts of the Assembly and is disabled by infirmity from passing through a lobby, his or her name may be communicated by his or her party whip to the lobby clerks and tellers and may be included in the numbers counted.”

*The following motions stood in the Order Paper:*

(c) In Standing Order 26, leave out paragraph (3) and insert —

“(3) Subject to Standing Order 27, the Speaker shall judge whether the question be carried or not by collecting voices.” — *[The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow).]*

(d) In Standing Order 26, leave out paragraph (5). — *[The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow).]*

**The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures:** Standing Order 27 is currently titled ‘Voting Where the Speaker’s Decision Is Challenged’. That title suggests that the procedure in the Standing Order is used only when the decision of the Speaker is challenged. However, the Speaker has discretion to use the procedure if he considers that the voice vote is unclear and a Division is needed. In practice, the Speaker’s decision is rarely challenged, and the most common use of Standing Order 27 occurs when the voice vote is unclear.

In order for a Division to go ahead, two Tellers must come forward for each side. As it is currently worded, Standing Order 27 does not address the possibility of Tellers not being nominated. However, current practice is that if either side fails to nominate two Tellers within a reasonable period, the Speaker may declare the result in favour of the Tellers who have come forward. The amendment codifies that practice.

The amendment also provides for a further matter, in connection with securing the doors. As it is currently worded, Standing Orders 27(3) states:

“After the lapse of four minutes from putting the question again he or she shall direct that the doors giving access to the division lobbies be secured.”

That requires the Speaker to direct that only the doors giving access to the Division Lobbies are secured. In practice, as Members will be aware, the doors to the Chamber and those leading from the corridors to the Division Lobbies are closed, which is a contravention of Standing Orders. The proposed amendment reflects current practice, which is what Members are comfortable and familiar with.

The Committee considered abstentions on a number of occasions and decided against allowing for the formal recording of those, but only after a good deal of thought and discussion.

I will now take Members through the detail of the amendments. Proposed new Standing Order 27(1) reflects the provisions that are in the current version of Standing Order 27(1). However, the current version allows the Speaker to use the provision only if his decision is challenged. The amended paragraph will allow for the process of a Division to commence in two circumstances, as outlined in proposed new Standing Order 27(1)(a) and (b). Proposed new sub-paragraph (a) allows the Speaker to sound the Division bell if he considers it appropriate. That will cover instances when the collection of voices is unclear, as well as other circumstances. For example, it would be normal to allow a Division on a cross-

community vote even if there were only a few dissenting voices. Proposed new sub-paragraph (b) allows for the Speaker’s judgement to be challenged.

Members may wish to note the introduction of the phrase “a question is carried” in proposed new Standing Order 27(1)(b). Currently, Standing Order 27(6) and Standing Order 26(3) use the words “motion”, “amendment” in reference to voting. However, votes are taken not only on motions and amendments but on clauses, schedules and long titles of Bills. The concepts of “motion” and “amendment” would have needed to be extended to cover all possible votes, and that would have been messy. However, the word “question” reflects current usage in Standing Order 27(3) as well as practice in the Chamber, when the Speaker puts the question on the motion, amendment, clause or schedule, etc.

In the proposed amendments, Standing Order 27(2) has been reworded to allow for the two circumstances when a Division is initiated — that is; when the Speaker considers it appropriate and in response to a challenge to his decision.

The provision contained in proposed new Standing Order 27(3) is currently provided for in Standing Order 27(2)(b) but has never been used. It provides a means whereby the Speaker can challenge a Member or Members who challenge his decision by asking for the views of the Assembly. Although there has been some minor rewording of the provision for greater clarity, the suggested amendment does not change the provision in any way. That provision has never been used, but has, nevertheless, been retained. It will allow for the current Speaker, or any future Speakers, to challenge Members who call Divisions in order to be disruptive or to waste the time of the Assembly.

Proposed new Standing Order 27(4) is a new provision to reflect the decision by the Committee to include a governing procedure for instances when there is a lack of Tellers. It states that the Speaker shall call for two Tellers for each side of the question, and proposed new sub-paragraph (a) states what will happen if one side does not produce two Tellers, which is that the question will be declared for the other side. Proposed new sub-paragraph (b) states what will happen if neither side produces two Tellers, which is that the question will not be carried.

Paragraph 3 in the current version contains a number of provisions, and in this suggested amendment, those provisions have been divided into separate paragraphs at (5), (6) and (7). Those paragraphs have had some rewording from the current version to reflect improved grammar, better readability and plain English, but the essence of the amendments recommended at paragraphs 5 and 7 reflect what is in the current version.

Paragraph 6 is changed to take account of the Committee decision on what doors should be secured and, again, there has been some rewording to reflect improved grammar, better readability and plain English.

Draft paragraph 7 provides for a provision that is in the current version at Standing Order 27(3) with no amendment.

The draft paragraph 8 provides for a provision that is in the current version at Standing Order 27(4) with no amendment.

Draft paragraphs 9 and 10 provide for provisions that are in the current version at Standing Orders 27(5) and (6) respectively with no amendment.

Draft paragraph 11 may seem like a new provision, but eagle-eyed Members will have noted that it is currently at Standing Order 26(5). This provision allows for a disabled or infirm Member to participate in a Division even if he or she cannot get into the Lobbies. As it deals with voting by Division, it fits better in Standing Order 27 than in Standing Order 26.

If the Assembly agrees to the amendments to Standing Order 27, there will need to be two consequential amendments to Standing Orders 26(3) and (5).

Standing Order 26(3) has been amended in two ways. The first amendment makes it clear that if a vote by the collection of voices is unclear, the Speaker should call for a Division. The second amendment removes the phrase “by show of hands”. Since the Division Lobbies came into usage, the Assembly has never voted by a show of hands and, therefore, that phrase has been deleted.

Standing Order 26(5) has been deleted because it has been moved to become Standing Order 27(11).

I recommend amendments (e), (c) and (d) as printed in the Order Paper, and I trust that Members followed all those amendments.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Thank you, Lord Morrow. That was very clear.

Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that all these motions require cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

Leave out Standing Order 27 and insert —

“27. VOTING - DIVISIONS

(1) The Speaker shall direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded if -

(a) he or she is unsure whether or not a question is carried following the collection of voices under Standing Order 26; or

(b) his or her judgement as to whether a question is so carried is challenged.

(2) Three minutes after this direction, the Speaker shall put the question again, and if paragraph (1)(a) or (b) still applies, he or she shall proceed as set out below. Otherwise he or she shall judge whether the question be carried in accordance with Standing Order 26(3).

(3) If, in the Speaker’s opinion, his or her judgement is unnecessarily challenged, he or she may take the vote of the Assembly by calling upon the members who support and who challenge his or her judgement successively to rise in their places and he or she shall thereupon, as he or she thinks fit, declare the determination of the Assembly without proceeding as set out below.

(4) The Speaker shall call for the nomination of two tellers for each side of the question but, if within a reasonable time after this call -

(a) two tellers for one side but not the other have been nominated, the determination of the Assembly shall be that of the side which has nominated the two tellers;

(b) two tellers for each side have not been nominated, the question shall not be carried.

(5) After tellers have been nominated, the Speaker shall direct the Assembly to divide, “ayes” to the right and “noes” to the left, and that the division bells be again sounded.

(6) Four minutes after this direction, the Speaker shall direct that the doors from the corridors to the Chamber and lobbies are secured.

(7) When all members in the lobbies have voted, the tellers shall bring the division lists to the table clerks who will announce the result.

(8) A member may vote in a division although he or she did not hear the question put.

(9) A member shall not be obliged to vote.

(10) If the votes in a division are equal the question shall not be carried.

(11) If any member is present within the precincts of the Assembly and is disabled by infirmity from passing through a lobby, his or her name may be communicated by his or her party whip to the lobby clerks and tellers and may be included in the numbers counted.”

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

In Standing Order 26, leave out paragraph (3) and insert —

“(3) Subject to Standing Order 27, the Speaker shall judge whether the question be carried or not by collecting voices.”

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

In Standing Order 26, leave out paragraph (5).

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Voting Registration Process

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

2.00 pm

**Mr McKay:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the difficulties that many people, particularly young people, are experiencing when trying to register to vote; further notes that the Chief Electoral Officer has decided to seek additional information in all cases, despite the fact that all applicants submit personal identifiers and sign a declaration; and calls on the Secretary of State and the Electoral Office to simplify the registration process as a matter of urgency.

The figure 39,014 is more than the number of votes that were cast in the whole of North Belfast, West Belfast, South Belfast and East Belfast respectively in the last election. It is also more than the number of votes that were cast for the Alliance Party at the last election. To put it in a better context, it is more people than live in either Ballymena or Newry. That figure is the total amount of registration forms that were rejected by the Electoral Office between 1 December 2007 and 1 December 2008.

It is quite clear that it is getting harder and harder to register to vote; especially for three categories of people. The first category is young people. There is no point in reaching out to young people and setting up youth councils and assemblies if we make it harder for young people to register to vote.

The second category is those who have failed to register or who have dropped off the electoral register, and the third is those who have changed their address. In all those cases, the name, address, date of birth, National Insurance number and a signature of declaration are required. However, even when that is required of all those people —

**Mr Brady:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McKay:** I will.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Member for giving way. I draw attention to a letter that came to my household from the Electoral Office. It states that the Chief Electoral Officer was reviewing whether my entry in the electoral register was correct. He stated that he was definitely not suggesting that I did anything wrong — it may have been that I was entitled to be registered at the address and simply forgot to inform him that I was no longer resident there. However, if I was no longer

resident there, I would not have received the letter in the first place. That seems to be slightly contradictory.

The letter goes on to state that unless the Chief Electoral Officer received a letter from me within 14 days from the date of his letter, he would assume that I accepted that I was no longer entitled to be registered at that address, and that he would remove my name from the electoral register without further notice.

I assume that the two-week period is an arbitrary decision on behalf of the Electoral Office because, presumably, if someone was on holiday or was away from their house for three weeks and that letter came within the first week and was not returned within 14 days, the person would be taken off the register. That is something that needs to be addressed.

**Mr McKay:** I thank the Member for his intervention. What he said clearly outlines the amount of confusion that people have and the ruthlessness of the Electoral Office in removing people from the electoral register.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. Perhaps he will clarify this in the substance of what he will say, but he talks about the ruthlessness of the electoral process and he challenges the Electoral Office for including what he regards as very challenging requirements. However, medical cards were illegally produced and electoral fraud occurred in the past. In fact, some people almost had printing booths outside voting stations, so does the Member not accept that we are in the current position because of that very action? It is a bit sweet for the party opposite to now be concerned about that particular issue.

**Mr McKay:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I recall how a member of the DUP was convicted of electoral fraud in the Coleraine area. No member of Sinn Féin has ever been convicted of electoral fraud. The Member should bear that in mind, but he is correct: electoral fraud is something that needs to be tackled, but it should not be tackled to such an extent that genuine people lose their votes.

Thousands and thousands of people — including many people who have voted their entire lives — simply cannot or will not provide the information that has been requested from them. It is their civil right to vote, but the Electoral Office has taken away that right. In recent weeks — and my colleague has already referred to a letter that his household received — the Chief Electoral Officer has sent letters to households in which unusually high numbers of adults are registered.

So, according to the Electoral Office, if a person is part of a family of seven, eight or nine, he or she is unusual. What does the Chief Electoral Officer want to do with those bigger households? In contrast with smaller households and families, it seems that the bigger households and families are being singled out for persecution. If family members do not respond

within fourteen days, they are erased from the register — there is no vote for them any more.

It is clear that if someone comes from a large household, he or she is more likely to lose his or her vote, and that is discrimination. Sinn Féin believes that that process is an abuse of the legislation and may be in breach of equality and human-rights legislation. Those people are legitimately on the register; they filled in an application form and signed a declaration. However, it seems that that is not good enough, and the Chief Electoral Officer wants to rob more people of their right to vote.

One of the demands made by the Electoral Office is that an individual must produce evidence of having lived in the Six Counties for at least three months. That three-month qualification does not apply in England, Scotland, Wales or the rest of Ireland, but the head of the Electoral Commission has confirmed that it applies here, despite the fact that the Chief Electoral Officer is of the opinion that the requirement serves no useful purpose. If it serves no useful purpose, why do young people, those who are not currently on the register and those who are changing addresses have to jump through hoops to prove that they meet the three-month residency requirement? The situation is preposterous.

Recently, Sinn Féin wrote to the Chief Electoral Officer to challenge legislation that excludes Irish citizens who were born in the North but who live abroad from voting in the European elections in June. The Good Friday Agreement provides for the legal right of people in the North to have their rights as Irish citizens fully recognised. That means that there should be no barrier that prevents Irish citizens from the North from exercising their democratic right. However, documentation from the Electoral Office specifically discriminates against Irish citizens who are born in the North by denying them the right to apply to be added to the electoral register and to vote if they are living abroad, while extending that option to British citizens only. Again, that is discrimination.

The Electoral Office has an overly bureaucratic, and sometimes threatening, approach to people who are trying to register to vote. Any attempt to deny citizens, including Irish citizens born in the North, the right to vote must be rejected. Discriminating against those in the North who choose Irish citizenship would turn the clock back 40 years, and that must not be allowed to happen.

It is worth reflecting on the comments made by my colleague Mr Brady. People are losing their vote, week in and week out. Given the history of the North of this country, where people had to fight for many years for the right to vote, it is an absolute shame and scandal that an attempt is being made to take the vote from people by stealth.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate, although I believe that the motion has not been properly considered. It suggests that the process for voter registration is somehow not fit for purpose and that it needs radical change. The evidence is simply not there to substantiate that claim.

First, I will mention the 11% decrease in electors that resulted from the shake out that was initiated by the new legislation. Of course, that figure will include some genuine voters who have been disenfranchised by the switch-over. However, the point of the new system was to decrease the number of registered voters. Given that 64% of people in Northern Ireland thought that fraud was so rife that it was affecting the results of elections in some areas, we can be certain that there were names on the register that should not have been there. As far as we can tell, the decrease in the number of electors removed most of those bogus electors from the role, and we should all be glad of that.

That happened because, for the first time, some people were required to individually register to vote and satisfactorily identify themselves before a ballot paper was issued. Those measures are in place for a sound purpose, and they are working. Our task now is to ensure that people who are not registered — for whatever reason — become registered. The Electoral Commission has done some work to improve registration rates among students, but more can be done.

It is dangerous to call for a simplification of the process, as the motion does. What does “simplification” mean? Does it mean watering down the safeguards? Does it mean removing the checks and balances that are in place to prevent fraud? If there is a way of slimming down the registration process while keeping the integrity that the new system has brought to the register, we should take that measure, by all means. However, we on this side of the House have doubts about whether that is possible.

A snap relaxation of the rules is not what is required; it would be more sensible and responsible to carry out a full evaluation of the current approach. It is not responsible to take ill-considered decisions to simplify a system that is, on the whole, working. It is thought that the names that are recorded on the electoral register are 95% accurate and that the register comprises 84% of the valid electorate. Those figures are not bad — indeed, the figure for accuracy is quite good. However, there is room for improvement in the register’s comprehensiveness.

**Mr Brady:** Does the Member agree that, in any system, the office issuing guidance or notification should understand the rules? I contacted the electoral office in Banbridge, and the people there seemed to be even more confused than me.

**Mr Kennedy:** I accept the Member's point to an extent, but it is important that the process is handled by an independent body — such as the Electoral Office — that is not under any influence, political or otherwise.

We cannot know at this stage whether a better register can be achieved through simplification, and, therefore, we need to properly evaluate the current practice. Given that the system of continuous registration is only two years old and only beginning to bed in, we should take time to consider emerging patterns and evaluate changes as we go along. To make large-scale changes at this stage would not be sensible or reasonable.

The fact that Sinn Féin tabled the motion leaves little room for the belief that it was done in good faith. The Northern Ireland public had little confidence in the old system of registration. They were suspicious about Sinn Féin's role in electoral fraud, which stemmed from that system, and the use of medical cards.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kennedy:** No; I have already given way. Sinn Féin is now looking for the rules to be loosened, and that does little to inspire confidence in its intentions. By and large, the public trust the electoral system — from registration to the counting of votes. If there is room for improvement, let us take the required time to look at all the options rather than rushing into bad decisions.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the motion. We had hoped to table an amendment in respect of the criteria and information, but we are happy to support the motion.

The SDLP is determined that there should be a one-person-one-vote system across Northern Ireland. We urge everyone who is eligible to vote to register and to use their vote in elections and referenda. The SDLP acknowledges the Electoral Office's work in getting people onto the electoral list. Indeed, the Electoral Office's recent initiatives resulted in 16,500 people being added to the electoral register in 2008.

2.15 pm

That includes a huge increase in the number of 17-year-olds. Last year, there were 244 registered 17-year-olds, and this year there are 7,738. That is mainly the result of the Electoral Office's Get on the List campaign, which was aimed at schools across Northern Ireland.

As a result of recent legislation, there has been a broadening of the groups that are entitled to postal votes, a relaxation of the requirement for photographic ID to be current, and additional use of information that schools can supply to facilitate the inclusion of new voters. That does not sound like the work of an organisation that is trying to prevent legitimate registration. We need to be careful not to suggest that the Electoral Office discriminates deliberately against a legitimate

group of people. However, I accept Daithí McKay's relevant and important point about large families.

The job of organising and running fair and democratic elections in Northern Ireland has been difficult and sometimes very dangerous. For decades, the SDLP and other parties have experienced deliberate and widespread abuse of the electoral system. Our workers have witnessed habitually — and tried to prevent — registration information being carried out from polling stations on Post-it notes. We have reported personation, and the result has been that our workers have suffered bullying and intimidation. As a result of those anti-democratic and intimidating practices, we campaigned for stricter control over the voting and registration processes.

We are also concerned that there may be cases in marginal seats where voters are registered in locations where they are not normally domiciled. We know the extremes to which some parties and individuals go to achieve political goals, and it is right that the Electoral Office should protect democracy against such abuse.

However, it is important that the registration process does not become so arduous that it prevents people from being able to access their legitimate right to vote. It is important that the Electoral Office ensures that no community — or large family, for that matter — is disadvantaged differentially as a result of the rules that it applies. If there is a differential disadvantage for any of the groups that are identified in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, mitigating action should be taken.

I understand that people who have been refused their legitimate right to register have complained because they have been unable to provide the prescribed evidence of normal residence. That is a matter of concern to all democrats, and the Electoral Office must ensure that people are able to register to vote. When we took up certain cases with the Electoral Office, we were informed that the legislation on the necessity to produce additional evidence as part of an application leaves such decisions to the discretion of the Chief Electoral Officer. He has made the decision to implement what can be best described as a stricter policy. He and his office need to address that issue.

As Daithí McKay pointed out, Electoral Office proposals to investigate families where seven or more members may be on the register should be re-evaluated to ensure that there is no negative impact on those large families that are genuinely entitled to be on the register. Indeed, such action must be justifiable. We support the motion.

**Dr Farry:** The Alliance Party has a lot of sympathy with Sinn Féin's motion. We recognise that it addresses a genuine problem that a number of people in Northern Ireland face. However, I question how realistic it is to conduct a review within a short time frame, but perhaps that is a matter for others.

It is worth stressing at the outset that electoral registration is an integral part of the democratic process. Democracy is not just about voting and determining who wins elections. In the rest of the world — and in democracies that are much less fragile than our own — who is and who is not on the electoral register are recognised as genuinely important questions. That was the case in the most recent presidential election in the United States, where a major feature of the Obama campaign was a drive to register people in the run-up to the election. In the United States, there are such drives to get people to register, not just drives to get people to go out and vote.

In that sense, it is about ensuring that the register is as comprehensive as possible and fully up to date, and that people who wish to participate in elections are able to do so. We therefore avoid the situation in which people are only motivated to seek to get on the register in the run-up to an election, rather than throughout the years between elections.

It is worth stressing that in Northern Ireland we have a particular context for elections. During the course of the Troubles, elections here were generally recognised as being free and fair by international standards, not least because the electoral process was taken out of the immediate control of the political process and placed under independent control. There has been respect for the integrity of what has unfolded. That said, major questions have been raised regarding fraud on the fringes of the electoral process. Quite rightly, that has been a concern for many people. As a consequence of that, Northern Ireland has, in some respects, been a pioneer of some of the changes that have been made to the electoral process. I wish to highlight and give my full support to two of those changes.

First, there is the process of individual registration rather than family registration, and that has been an important reform. Secondly, there is the process of continuous registration, which, potentially, means that a full audit of the register happens once every 10 years. That is a sound decision and avoids the repetitive process whereby people are obliged to fill out forms every year.

**Mrs Long:** The Member mentioned the issue of individual registration rather than family registration. However, there is a specific issue with regard to larger, blended families where there are adults sharing a household, and who are a family, but who perhaps have different surnames. Those adult children may not have any utilities registered in their name. Proving that they live at that address can be quite difficult for the young people who fall into that category. Surely that is something that could be addressed proactively by the Electoral Office in order to try to ease that process.

**Dr Farry:** I am grateful to my colleague for that, and I welcome her back to the Chamber. That was a useful intervention, which brings me to my next point. I stress that although it is important to recognise and support the importance of individual registration, in itself, that may throw up other problems. Individual registration needs to be properly thought through, and, where it is clear that problems have been identified in the system, further reforms made.

For large families, there may be a difficulty in ensuring that everyone in the family has the opportunity to prove that they live at that address and that they are qualified to vote. In the context of large families, we should bear in mind that there are, as my colleague pointed out, blended families made up of people with different surnames and from different backgrounds. Households in Northern Ireland are no longer purely made up of the nuclear family of 50 years ago. There are a whole range of different family arrangements, all of which are of equal value. We should not work on any assumptions about what is, or what is not, the norm. We have to bear in mind that younger people can have particular problems in proving a number of the criteria, in that they do not necessarily have access to the range of documentation that perhaps older people would have.

Finally, there is the issue of ethnic minorities. We welcome the fact that Northern Ireland is becoming a much more diverse society. However, people from ethnic minorities may have difficulties in accessing some of the necessary documentation. There is an issue with respect to the recognition of passports that are neither British nor Irish. For example, Indian passports are not recognised. India is a sovereign state and a member of the Commonwealth, and we respect its democracy. However, for some reason, those identifiers are not recognised by the Electoral Office as being watertight. That is perhaps something that we need to look at.

I recognise the issue that Sinn Féin is putting forward, and I appreciate that a further review is required. I am sceptical as to how quickly that can be done. However, there is no harm in highlighting the issue on the Floor of the House.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the motion. It is an unfortunate reality of our past that, not so long ago, the state employed a variety of jackboot tactics to deny people in our community the right to vote, from gerrymandering to batons and bullets. It was clear that the then unionist regime was not prepared to surrender that most democratic of principles, which was termed, at the time, as “One man, one vote”.

However, the nationalist and republican community refused to be cowed and broken; and, today, we are

equal partners in a Government that is founded on partnership and equality. That should be, and is, welcomed by all. There will be no going back.

The tactics being employed by the Electoral Office today may be a lot more subtle than those used in 1969, but the end results are largely the same. Many thousands of people are being disenfranchised by the unnecessary and obstructive bureaucratic hurdles that are being placed in the way of those who are attempting to register.

**Mr O'Loan:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Anderson:** I cannot; the time will not allow me. I would give way, but the Deputy Speaker has told me how much time I have. I will give way later.

Even after filling out a registration form and providing their name, address, date of birth, national insurance number and signature, people are still being denied their place on the register. Sinn Féin has found that hundreds of registration forms submitted in the past year were rejected by the Electoral Office. It is clear that Douglas Bain, rather than doing all he can to ensure that everyone entitled to vote is on a live register, is making it harder. Now, we have learned that the Electoral Office is targeting people who live in larger family households for special scrutiny, and there are real fears that many of those people will be systemically removed from the register.

Douglas Bain must explain what is irregular about a family of six or seven adults living in the one household. He must explain why he hounded a 68-year-old man through the courts for electoral fraud because of a failure to provide a national insurance number. That cost the public purse many thousands of pounds in a court case, and it resulted in a fine of one penny for the so-called offender. Is that a proper use of public resources and public finance? Was that unfortunate individual the closest thing that Douglas Bain could find to electoral fraud?

Electoral fraud is practically non-existent in the North of Ireland. An independent survey carried out by the Electoral Commission showed that the electoral register here is 94.3% accurate. That is widely accepted as the most accurate anywhere in Ireland and in Britain. Despite that, the previous annual report from the electoral office identified almost 200,000 people here who are entitled to vote but who are not on the electoral register. One would think that the Electoral Office should do all that it can to help those people to get registered, rather than making it more difficult for them to do so.

A clear denial of the right to vote is happening, and I have to question the motives of the Electoral Office, which is accountable to and funded by the NIO, and, therefore, far from independent. The Electoral Office has access to databases from the Central Services Agency,

local authorities and the Housing Executive. It has access to information on all deaths and on people turning 18. Using that information, it should be able to track changes itself, rather than forcing people to jump through hoops in an over-complicated and bureaucratic process.

Many people, particularly those from disadvantaged areas, are turned off by the process. They already feel detached from the system, and excessive demands for unnecessary additional evidence are a further disincentive. Rather than hounding pensioners through the courts for 1p fines and targeting larger families, the Electoral Office must proactively bring forward initiatives to assist people, particularly those from disadvantaged areas, to get on the register. I support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order Members. As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue immediately after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Jim Shannon.

*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

#### Victims' Commissioners: Work Plan

1. **Mr Attwood** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it has approved the work plan for the victims commissioners; and, if not, to detail the reasons why this approval has not yet been given. (AQO 2346/09)

**The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):** The agreed final draft of the Commission for Victims and Survivors' 2008-09 work programme was approved on 16 February. That approval was conveyed to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 17 February. As the work programme covers the period from June 2008 to March 2009, the Department has been working closely with the commission on the development of the plan in order to enable it to commence and continue its work throughout that period.

The work programme reflects the fact that the commissioners were formally appointed on 2 June 2008. They have been heavily involved in the work to create a new commission from scratch. As well as the establishment of the commission, the work programme covers areas such as the initial review of the needs of victims and survivors; formulation of a draft aim and set of objectives for a victims' and survivors' forum; and a design plan for that forum.

The commission is working on its draft 2009-2010 work programme, which will build on the current approved programme. We expect to receive the draft from the commission shortly.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Given that that funding is essential to victims' groups, will the deputy First Minister give a cast-iron guarantee it will be in place and will be released within the next 10 days in order to guarantee continued funding for the range of victims' and survivors' groups across the North during the next financial year?

Has the deputy First Minister had any conversations with his colleague the First Minister about bringing forward new legislation on the Floor of the Assembly

that will amend the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and change the definition of the word "victim" that has arisen from the conflict in Northern Ireland?

**The deputy First Minister:** We intend to make £12.5 million available for work with victims and survivors during the next financial year. That represents an increase of 50% on this year's allocation and forms part of the £36 million announced previously. We will work to ensure that that money supports the important work carried out by victims' groups and provides much-needed support for individual victims and survivors.

We have agreed that under the core funding scheme an additional 10% will be made available to groups in line with verified expenditure under the terms of the scheme. Obviously, we will endeavour to get that money to groups as quickly as possible.

As regards the definition of a "victim"; it is, as the Member has identified correctly, contained in the 2006 Order. In February and March 2008, we confirmed that we would be seeking the views of the proposed victims' and survivors' forum and the victims' commissioners on the matter and that any proposed change to the definition and subsequent amendment to legislation would require the agreement of the Executive and the Assembly.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the deputy First Minister for his reply on the work of the victims' commissioners. He will be aware of the controversy surrounding victims' commissioner Patricia MacBride's recent comments on the 'Shared Troubles' website. Does he consider it appropriate for a victims' commissioner, who is tasked with serving the entire community, to use language that appears to glorify terrorism? Will he and the First Minister bring those concerns to Ms MacBride and make her aware of the huge offence that her remarks have caused to genuine victims?

**The deputy First Minister:** My understanding — and I hope that I am correct — is that those comments were made when Patricia MacBride was 14 years of age and in the aftermath of a number of traumatic experiences that she endured in her own life. Her reasons for posting the story on the 'Shared Troubles' website are, undoubtedly, personal and, of course, are now a matter of public record.

The commission will provide people with an arena that has the structure and strength to record their stories, whether it is through a forum or through another method.

**Mrs Long:** Mr Speaker, I request some latitude before I ask my question. I thank you, other Members and the secretariat for the many kind words spoken and the deeds done during our recent bereavement. My

family and I appreciated the support of those who sympathised with us at that time.

We now have a victims' service, a victims unit and a Victims' Commission. In the deputy First Minister's judgement, has that simplified or complicated the arrangements for those who want to access services?

**The deputy First Minister:** The establishment of the Victims' Commission has been important. The commission has drafted an initial work programme and continues to work strategically to achieve the targets outlined in the draft work programme. It has held a series of public meetings with individuals and various groups inside and outside the sector, and commissioners are engaged in supportive work with a broad range of victims. Moreover, the commission has developed corporate governance structures and has drafted and agreed standing orders.

Although it is still early days, a tremendous amount of work has been done. Victims' groups throughout the community undoubtedly welcome the commissioners' level of accessibility. I am confident that the commission will go from strength to strength and will be of real benefit to all those who have suffered as a result of conflict.

## Security Situation

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether it plans to meet with the Chief Constable of the PSNI in the next month to discuss the current security situation.

(AQO 2347/09)

**The deputy First Minister:** As the Member may be aware, after the shooting of two soldiers at Massereene barracks on Saturday 7 March and the PSNI officer who was on duty in Craigavon on 9 March, the First Minister and I met the Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Orde, and the Minister of State, Paul Goggins, at Stormont Castle on Tuesday 10 March. That meeting was useful, and we will continue to keep the situation under review and hold further talks as necessary.

**Mr Moutray:** Does the deputy First Minister agree that it is paramount that anyone with any information should relay it to the PSNI in order to apprehend those murderous thugs? Will he support the Chief Constable's deployment of whatever resources he deems necessary to prevent further attacks?

**The deputy First Minister:** The three killings were terrible events carried out by people whose sole purpose is to destroy the peace process, the political institutions of which we are part and, effectively, to attempt to plunge our community — and I do not speak about two communities; we represent one community — into mayhem and destruction.

As democratically elected representatives of the people, we cannot allow that to happen under any circumstances. I believe that the people who carried out those acts wondered how Sinn Féin would respond. Undoubtedly, they hoped that their acts would create huge difficulties for Sinn Féin. Furthermore, the unionist community, and unionist elected representatives, may have wondered how Sinn Féin would deal with the situation.

We take our responsibilities seriously, and I take my responsibility to work jointly with the First Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister very seriously. In a situation in which people are determined to destroy a peace process and a political process that has been painstakingly built over many years, and when one is asked to take sides, there is only one side to take — that of peace and democracy. That is what the Chamber and the political institutions are about.

The entire community supports the process overwhelmingly. Communities and parents do not want our society to be plunged back into conflict. People overwhelmingly reject a return to the old days. Parents are concerned about their children's future, and about how we move forward.

We are charged with a responsibility to lead the political process, and we have to take our responsibilities very seriously indeed. I have made it quite clear that I agree with Stephen Moutray: anybody with any scrap of information whatsoever that will lead to the apprehension and conviction of those responsible for trying to plunge our society back into conflict should give that information immediately to the PSNI. There are no ifs, buts or maybes about that.

In the last few days, a number of unionist representatives have said that it has been a difficult time for me over the course of the last two weeks. It was a more difficult time for those who lost loved ones. It is difficult being a political leader, but if one is chosen by the people to lead, one has to lead from the front — one cannot lead from the back. I have attempted to lead from the front. I have made it absolutely clear that under no circumstances will we see these groups — and I see that one of those groups has issued a statement in today's 'The Irish News' that distances it from the killings of the last two weeks. That group calls itself the INLA. Those are people who killed three citizens in my city in the course of the last 12 months —

**Mr McNarry:** How many did the Provos kill?

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**The deputy First Minister:** — with ongoing speculation that they were also involved in the killing of a sheep farmer in Claudy in County Derry.

We stand here in the face of what was, undoubtedly, a full frontal assault on these institutions — the institutions with which we have agreed to move forward, alongside the Irish Government and the British Government and with the support of the full international community.

When we take sides, we take the side of peace and democracy. We take the side of every Member in the House who wants to move forward in a positive and constructive way. None of us can do anything about the apprehension of the killers. All that we can do is give our full support to Hugh Orde, who is charged with a very difficult responsibility — to bring those perpetrators to justice. That is what we will do. We will support the Chief Constable as he moves forward, through policing structures and through lawful and transparent policing, to ensure that everybody recognises that that sort of activity is totally and absolutely unacceptable.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr McKay:** A Cheann Comhairle, I concur entirely with what the deputy First Minister has said. Does he support the view that there is no need for the return of any British Army personnel of any sort to the streets of the North, and that the proper avenue to go through is that of the PSNI?

**The deputy First Minister:** I heard Hugh Orde state that he is not going to countenance a situation in which British soldiers will be back on the streets of the North. Of course, the other aspect of the activities of those groups, who claim that they want to see the reunification of Ireland, is effectively bringing about a set of circumstances in which tens of thousands of British soldiers would be returned to the streets of the North. For what? To what end, and to what purpose?

It is my view that the strategy that they have embarked on will not find favour in the broad nationalist/republican constituency on this island. Under no circumstances do we want to see a militarised situation. The British Army is off the streets of the North. We have a policing service that is acting in the interests of all of our people. The people who need to get off the streets, laneways and highways of the North of Ireland are those who are trying to plunge our society back into conflict.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the comments of the deputy First Minister, and ask that — in any discussions that he plans to have with the Chief Constable in his role as deputy First Minister — he and the First Minister agree to support work with young people in the constituency, and the channelling of additional resources to Craigavon. I am sure that he saw from the scenes of the last few days that there is a determined effort from those who would draw us back into the worst of the past to corrupt our young people. We need

additional resources — in policing, in youth work, and in community reconciliation — in the Craigavon area.

2.45 pm

**The deputy First Minister:** I agree with the Member. It is vital that the political process and all its attendant aspects are in touch with our young people, whether in Craigavon, Derry, Belfast or anywhere else. We have a huge responsibility to recognise that some of the mouthpieces of those organisations are targeting our young people and are looking for support from 14-, 15-, 16- and 17-year-olds. In the course of a number of interviews over the past couple of weeks, I said that I knew some of those mouthpieces — people who were absent from the conflict for 20 years, and who, in the aftermath of the IRA ceasefire of 1994, went back onto the streets and accused others of selling out and blah, blah, blah.

We must recognise that those groups are attempting to prey on young people in society. The First Minister and I will do whatever is required, in conjunction with our Executive colleagues and the PSNI, to ensure that those groups are not allowed to succeed.

I do not believe that they are succeeding, by the way. They are having an effect on only very small groups of impressionable young people. The vast majority of our young people have absolutely nothing to do with that type of activity, and they will be huge supporters of the peace process as we move forward. There are Members here, for example, who chair community engagement committees of the Policing Board. The challenge is there for all of us to take up. We all have a duty to see what we can do to further undermine the activities of those groups, which, I am certain, have no support whatsoever in the community, especially among our young people.

Most important of all, I say to them — if they are listening — that they have no prospect whatsoever of success. Their actions, although deadly, and although they bring great grief and hardship to families, are absolutely futile.

It was clear to the First Minister and me when we were in the United States that, although the three killings caused an initial shock, the big story that has flowed from the events of the past couple of weeks — in the United States and on the island of Ireland — was the way in which all the politicians in this House and in the Executive came together to send a strong message that we will not be divided or deflected; nor will we stand idly by and see political institutions, which are overwhelmingly supported by the community, destroyed by people whose only objective in life is to further their own ends.

**Mr Gardiner:** Given the deputy First Minister's statement that people who have information need to give it to the police services of Northern Ireland and

the Irish Republic, are we right to assume that the leaders of the CIRA and RIRA are based in the Irish Republic? Is he aware of any special legislation and procedures that can expedite the arrest and detention of those individuals for trial in Northern Ireland?

**The deputy First Minister:** I have no doubt whatsoever that the gardaí and the police service in the North, who are working closely together, know the identities of the leaders of those organisations. All of us who are in positions of authority have a responsibility to exhort people throughout the island of Ireland to assist the police services, North and South, in the prevention of the activities of those groups. I say without hesitation that people should support the police on this island and help them in whatever way they can. The police services believe that they have the legislative resources to deal with the situation.

So, we should not knee-jerk or overreact. The dissident groups do not have the ability to sustain any sort of a campaign, although that does not mean that they will not be lucky, from their perspective, every now and again in isolated incidents.

Along with the Irish Government and the British Government, we in this House have to keep our nerve. We have to move forward in a way that shows us to be totally and absolutely united in the face of such activities and give our full support to the Garda Síochána and the PSNI.

### Shared and Better Future

3. **Mr McCausland** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) when a strategy for a shared and better future will be published. (AQO 2348/09)

**The deputy First Minister:** Improving relationships between and within communities here and building a shared and better future remains a top priority for this Department and for the Executive. We are continuing to develop and refine the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration to examine how we can build on the achievements of previous initiatives and programmes.

Our work at ministerial level in OFMDFM, as well as throughout the Department at all levels, has demonstrated our commitment to building cohesive and inclusive communities. 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 existing and new communities is better resourced than ever. We also

want to ensure that those resources are used in an effective way, so we have been assessing existing programmes and considering new approaches to ensure tangible outcomes from our funding and actions.

We have increased funding to minority ethnic groups by two thirds and 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. There was a 12·1% drop in racist hate crime between 2006-07 and 2007-08. Likewise, there was a 13·2% reduction in sectarian-motivated crimes and three out of five young people in 2007 reported that relationships between Protestants and Catholics were getting better. However, we are not complacent — we are leading and driving change in our society and in our work, through the Department and the Executive, to deliver a shared and better future for all our people.

The delay in producing a programme for cohesion, sharing and integration is an indication of the depth of consideration that it has been given. We are still determined to bring the programme forward as soon as possible, but not before we are satisfied that we have got the detail right.

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Will he explain what his colleague Martina Anderson meant when she said in 'Republican News' that the shared future policy was dreamed up by British seurocrats:

"to airbrush their own role in the conflict from the history books."

There is a widespread desire for a strong and robust strategy for a shared and better future, and the events of recent weeks have highlighted the need for such a strategy. Therefore, can we conclude that the delay in publishing the shared future strategy is related to the fact that some leading figures in Sinn Féin have such perverse opposition to a shared future?

**The deputy First Minister:** I cannot accept that. I explained the position of OFMDFM on the issue in my original answer.

**Mr McFarland:** Given the recent dissident threat, does the deputy First Minister agree that there is a need to speed up the shared future agenda? I ask that because slow political movement and, on occasion, paralysis, as we have seen recently in OFMDFM, could encourage those who oppose the peace process.

**The deputy First Minister:** In my original answer, I made it absolutely clear that we are continuing to work on the issue and are absolutely committed to a shared and better future. Obviously, when we are satisfied that we have the strategy right, we will make it public and present it to the Committee. In the meantime, be assured that a tremendous amount of

work is continuing, which is being led by our Departments, the Assembly and the Executive.

**Mr Ford:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer to Stephen Moutray and for his firm commitment to support the PSNI's efforts to catch the terrorists who committed the two recent atrocities. I also very much welcome his statement that we represent one community.

That is a vital statement for the future, and he and the First Minister have made that clear in their recent responses.

Is it not vital that we do not have just the negative unity and condemnation, but that we now have a positive unity in promoting the shared future agenda and making it a real priority, not only in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but across every Department?

**The deputy First Minister:** I agree with the Member, and we intend to expedite that.

**Mr Dallat:** I welcome the responses from the deputy First Minister. Will he agree that, given our experiences over the past 40 years, a shared future is the single, most critical aspect of life that we must work on, and that any delay in bringing forward the proposals must be examined immediately?

**The deputy First Minister:** I hope that the leadership shown — not just by the First Minister and me in the course of what was a major challenge to these institutions but by all of the politicians and political parties in the House — is a very clear statement of where we need to go. In the aftermath of these terrible killings, we are in a different place. The challenges before all of us, in the context of what the Member has said, are obvious.

### Special Economic Taskforce

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the remit of the Special Economic Taskforce. (AQO 2349/09)

8. **Mr Cree** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for how long it is planned that the Special Economic Taskforce will operate. (AQO 2353/09)

**The deputy First Minister:** With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will take questions 4 and 8 together.

Members will be aware that, in the last six months of 2008, the First Minister and I met with a series of stakeholder groups to hear at first hand about the problems emerging as a result of the deepening economic crisis. Those meetings were most informative and useful

in helping us to design and construct the package of measures that we announced on 15 December 2008.

To allow us to continue that dialogue, and to tap into the well of local economic and other talents, we have set up a task force under the title of the cross-sector advisory forum. The forum will be jointly chaired by the First Minister and me, and will have 29 members. Its remit is to make recommendations for addressing problems arising from the economic crisis.

With regard to how long the group will last, the simple answer is that it will last for as long as it is needed. The terms of reference for the group allow that the First Minister and I will keep the existence of the group under review to assess the need for ongoing meetings. A copy of the terms of reference and membership of the group will be placed in the Assembly Library for information. The first meeting of the forum is scheduled for 6 April 2009.

**Mr McCallister:** Does the deputy First Minister agree that immediate action on the economic front is what is called for, rather than waiting for a report? Unemployment now stands at 75% above last year's level. The Executive's failure to meet for almost half of that period, and the Finance Minister's recent U-turn in reordering the Programme for Government to take account of the new circumstances —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to come to his question.

**Mr McCallister:** Does the deputy First Minister not agree that we need more immediate action now?

**The deputy First Minister:** The stakeholders that the First Minister and I were privileged to meet were very positive and constructive, and are very supportive of the establishment of the forum. I hope that the first meeting of the forum will show that we are very determined to take on board the advice that is coming from a wide range of people in society.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Speed is of the essence in this matter. Is it anticipated that the task force will be able to make interim reports so that urgent action can be taken to improve the economy?

**The deputy First Minister:** We will certainly consider that.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the deputy First Minister provide an assurance that the forum will not be a mere talking shop? Will he acknowledge that we need solutions to our current economic difficulties? Will he tell the House if there will be an emphasis on releasing public contracts sooner rather than later, and on job retention and job creation?

**The deputy First Minister:** Members of the forum will be nominated by the stakeholder organisations with whom we have met over the past six months. We intend that it will reach across the full width of interests, collecting the range of talent and insight that we need to address the economic crisis.

The economic situation, as we all know, is volatile. Its problems emerge, deepen and change. The group must be wide and flexible enough to address the full range of problems that have arisen or might arise in future. We feel that the wide remit of the group contains a clear message that there is nothing that we are not prepared to consider to protect the interests of local people and businesses, and that includes the points made by the Member.

3.00 pm

## ENVIRONMENT

### Gold-mining: Cavanacaw, Omagh

1. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to stop the removal of surplus rock from the gold-mining operation at Cavanacaw, Omagh (AQO 2366/09)

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** The Department of the Environment has followed its general approach to enforcement, and in this instance, the operator has shown a willingness to remedy the breach of planning control. Therefore, it has not been necessary to issue any statutory notices.

Recent negotiations have resulted in the cessation of surplus rock being removed from the site, pending the outcome of a planning application to vary the condition in the original planning approval K1992/0713. The removal of rock ceased on 6 February 2009, and assurances have been given to the Department that removal of surplus rock will not recommence until such time as the current application has been determined.

**Mr Doherty:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Perhaps he will be able to find time in his schedule to visit the area so that he can meet local residents and see for himself the destructive reality of what has happened there. Why has Omagh Minerals been allowed to apply for a retrospective amendment to the planning decision without the Planning Office having first completed its investigation into the numerous breaches of the current planning application, especially given that that planning permission was granted only after years of consultation and a public inquiry?

**The Minister of the Environment:** With respect to my hearing the story behind this matter, the Member

will be aware that I have met people from the area already who drew it to my attention. Shortly after that meeting, enforcement action resulted in the submission of the current application, which includes a closure plan for the site. Of course, a closure plan was a condition of the original planning permission, and the company was in breach of that condition because no such plan was lodged. Part of the purpose of the new planning application was to submit a closure plan.

I must say that it is not unusual to receive a planning application after enforcement action has been taken; indeed, in many cases, enforcement actions generate applications for retrospective planning approval.

**Mr Buchanan:** The Minister will be well aware of the concerns of Cavanacaw residents about the removal of large volumes of rock from the quarry. What formal enforcement notices has his Department served on the operators of the gold mine, who are currently in breach of a number of conditions in their original application? Is the Minister satisfied that there is sufficient surplus rock on site to restore, as part of the overall closure plan, that beautiful part of the Sperrins to its original state?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Department served formal warning letters on the operators to advise them of the initial breach in the planning conditions. Subsequently, the operators submitted a planning application to remedy that breach. In addition, the Department issued a breach-of-conditions letter to advise of other breaches of conditions, and the operators responded by providing additional information to satisfy the requirements relating to the highlighted breaches. The Department is investigating that additional information.

With respect to surplus rock, as I said earlier, the operator is no longer removing any rock from the site. Surveys have been carried out on the size of the hole in the ground and the amount of material that is there, and the operator has to submit the information from those surveys.

The Department will then make an assessment, which will go to construction branch and a decision will be taken whether there is surplus rock on the site. Until all that work has been done, I cannot say whether rock can be taken off the site or whether the rock that is there can be used to make good the damage.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for that update. I note that in the last portion of his answer he said that assessments must be carried out by the owners and developers. Will the Minister confirm that the Department has carried out its own assessment on the site? Have any of those reports been finished? If so, are they available to the House and the public?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Member knows that the normal method of dealing with a planning

application is, first, to get the applicant to supply the information that the Department requires to process an application. The size of the hole in the ground must be ascertained, as well as what material is on site.

Once that information has been received, it will be for construction branch to advise the Department on whether there is sufficient material on site to deal with it. In dealing with the planning application, once the required information has been received, the Department must consider all the points raised by objectors and consultees. The Department cannot make an assessment and subsequent determination of the application until all that has been done.

**Mr Gallagher:** Will the Minister provide the date on which the notice to cease excavation at the site was issued by his Department? Have enforcement officers been to the site since that notice was issued, and have they furnished reports to the Department?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The notice was given prior to 6 February. I cannot give the Member the exact date, although had I known that that amount of detail was to be requested, I would have sought it. However, I will write to the Member with the date on which the enforcement decision was issued.

The site is being monitored, which is why I can say what I have today. If the Member is aware of any other information that shows that my statements are incorrect or if the Member has received information to the contrary, I would like to know, because I regard this as a serious issue. From the reports that I have received, I can say that no further rock has been removed from the site since 6 February. I can give assurances that when the matter was drawn to my attention, I immediately contacted officials and I believe that prompt action was taken.

## Planning Policy Statement 21

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the work of the Independent Working Group on PPS 21, and if its work will be completed within the specified time frame. (AQO 2367/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The independent working group held its first meeting on 3 February 2009 and it is required to report to me by 26 June 2009. All the information that I have thus far is that the group will complete its work by that stage. I make it clear to the Member that 26 June is not an aspirational date — it is a date that has been given to the group to report to me.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. When does he envisage the publication of the finished policy? Will that report include the completed work of

the independent working group? Will it also include the new rural design guidelines? Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a chur in iúl don Aire.

**The Minister of the Environment:** In response to the last part of the Member's question, I do not think that the publication of the group's report and work on the design guidelines will coincide. The Department has not set a firm date for the publication of the design guidelines. The review group will report to me on 26 June. That report will go to the Executive review group for consideration, and a final decision will be made after which the report will be published.

Given that the summer period will intervene — and, again, I am not trying to avoid the question, but I do not have an exact date, because that will really depend on the work of the Executive subgroup — realistically, we are looking at autumn, possibly September, for the final publication.

**Mr Weir:** How does progress on Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 21 compare with progress on the overall planning reform process?

**The Minister of the Environment:** PPS 21 is taking considerably longer than we had hoped. It is the nature of this place that one must get cross-community support for new policies, and a lot of that happens before anything is ever brought near the House. Sometimes, when issues are difficult and contentious, it takes longer than some people would expect, and I would prefer, to address those.

Of course, some people will not even engage in the process at times, which makes it even more difficult. I have been frank with the House before about the fact that we are having difficulties with the planning reform proposals. I intimated that to the Environment Committee when we last met. I can only hope that those difficulties will be cleared, so that the planning reform proposals can be put out to consultation fairly soon.

I want to reiterate that I understand that people want to get this right and that they want to ensure that they have an input; however, there is a strict timeline for planning reform. If councils are to receive the planning powers that are essential for the work of the new councils and that the House wants them to have, these planning reform proposals must go through.

Secondly, if we want to make the planning system more streamlined in order to facilitate the kind of economic role that planning can play in Northern Ireland, we must get the planning reform proposals through. I hope that the issues will be resolved quickly so that the time that we have lost already — about two months — can be regained.

**Mr Dallat:** Now that the era of building mansions in the countryside has come to an end, will the Minister agree with me that the pendulum has swung to the

other extreme? Does he accept that the pressure from the planners across Northern Ireland to restrict the size of new homes to 100 sq m or 1,100 sq ft makes them far too small to meet the needs of a modern family?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I am not so sure that the Member is correct. I must say that SDLP members — although they wave their green credentials around their heads fairly frequently — seem to be the ones that most vigorously campaign for unbridled development in the countryside in Northern Ireland.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**The Minister of the Environment:** Even the Member from the Green Party nodded in agreement when I made that comment; I must have hit the issue just about right.

As far as the size of new buildings is concerned, draft PPS 21 makes it clear that replacement dwellings will be allowed to go outside the curtilage or footprint of the building that is to be replaced if that is necessary in order to build a house to modern standards. As far as I know, the figure is 150 sq m, but, of course, the consultation period has not yet finished. I hope that the SDLP, rather than simply griping about draft PPS 21, will actually make some constructive proposals and provide input to the consultation. That might be one of the things that it could do, although I will not, as Members opposite are indicating, be holding my breath, given past experience.

3.15 pm

### Planning Service: Ministerial Representations

3. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of the Environment how many representations he has made to the Planning Service since coming into office.  
(AQO 2368/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Since coming into office, I have made 135 representations to the Planning Service, and I am glad that the Member gave me the opportunity to say so. That works out at about 15 representations each month, and I hope that it demonstrates that, despite holding ministerial office, I still do my best to carry out my duties in the Assembly and on behalf of my constituents.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given that previous Ministers of the Environment did not consider it necessary to become involved in the planning process, does the Minister not find such involvement strange, particularly that of his colleague and predecessor, Arlene Foster? Does the Minister acknowledge that a conflict of interest arises when a Minister becomes involved in planning decisions?

**The Minister of the Environment:** No one can say that I take my lead from anyone else in the Assembly — I am my own person, and I do my own thing.

The Member should not find it odd that I wish to carry out my constituency duties as rigorously as possible. Just because I am a Minister does not mean that my constituents do not come to me with planning applications and other issues. If I were to show my constituents the door — to tell them that I am sorry that, as the Minister of the Environment, I am so important that I cannot take up their cause with the planners — that would be odd. I always seek to be as tough and as fair as possible in such representations to the planners.

**Mr Beggs:** In response to a question for written answer, the Minister stated that he had simply sought an update on the planning application to build a supermarket and cinema in Larne. In his constituency news-sheet, however, he stated that he worked to bring a cinema and supermarket to the town. Will he clarify whether he lobbied the planners on that matter?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Member may infer from my answer to the previous question that, of course, I spoke to the planners about that application.

**Mr Neeson:** So did I.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I acknowledge that another colleague from East Antrim Mr Neeson also works extremely hard.

It may be that the Member who asked the question is rather miffed at not being on the bandwagon. People in Larne are keen to have a supermarket; 56% leave the town to shop elsewhere. If the Member missed being on that bandwagon because of his indolence, he should not use the Floor of the Assembly to demonstrate an attitude of sour grapes. As one of my neighbours, he should be glad that I acted, and I am sure that he will use the supermarket when it has been built. He should be pleased that he has such a good representative who is ensuring that he will have a proper shopping opportunity in Larne.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr T Clarke:** Does the Minister expect that he and other Ministers will stop representing their constituents because of potential conflicts of interest?

**The Minister of the Environment:** Absolutely not, and it would be interesting to see, for example —

**Mr Kennedy:** The Minister is being flattered.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I am, and I greatly enjoy a bit of flattery.

It would be interesting to see whether the Minister for Social Development has stopped representing her

constituents to the Housing Executive or on social security issues? *[Interruption.]*

**The Minister of the Environment:** I heard an allegation that she never started making such representations, but I cannot comment on that.

Has the Minister for Regional Development stopped making representations to the Roads Service on behalf of his constituents? I suspect not. Has the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety stopped making representations on behalf of his constituents? I suspect that, if I were to ask every Minister in the Assembly the same question, I would find that none of them are slow to make representations to their respective Departments on constituency issues. Why on earth people consider that the Minister of the Environment should be singled out because of representations on planning applications, I do not know.

**Mr McCarthy:** What impact does the Minister think that it has on his staff whenever he lobbies on behalf of his constituents one day, and the next, he lobbies in his role as Minister with responsibility for the Planning Service? Does he not think that it is a contradiction in terms if he lobbies on behalf of his constituents one day and is the boss of that Department the next?

**The Minister of the Environment:** Sometimes I only think that I am the boss of the Department. Whenever one gets into ministerial office, one finds that the roles are not always so clear-cut. Whenever I make representations to planners on behalf of constituents, and those representations highlight significant planning issues, identify proper parts of planning policy, and point to the way in which matters should be taken into consideration before the application is determined, the planners will respond.

I have made representations on 135 cases so far, and on many occasions, the planners said that, despite the views that I expressed, it remains their view that I am wrong and that their decision is right, and I abide by that. Equally, at times, they agreed with points that I made. However, I think that planning officers are experienced enough to understand that they will receive representations from me and that they will then make a judgement on the basis of the representations that I have made. The only case where I have the final say is in article 31 applications, and at that stage, I seek to avoid getting involved in the process until the report on the matter in question comes to me.

### Republic of Ireland Counterpart

4. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what contact he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, since coming into office.  
(AQO 2369/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** On 26 June 2008, which was about one week after I came into office, I had a trilateral meeting in Stormont with Jim Fitzpatrick, one of the GB Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State in the Department for Transport, and the Republic's Minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey, to consider the position on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the UK and Ireland.

John Gormley, who is the Republic's Minister of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, wrote to me to welcome me to my position. Mind you, I think that it may have been a tongue-in-cheek welcome, but nonetheless, he welcomed me. He suggested that we have an informal meeting ahead of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, which was held in the autumn. However, at that time, the Member's party was denying me the opportunity to meet in North/South Ministerial Council mode because it refused to do any Executive business, with the result that we could not clear any papers for those meetings. Indeed, it was not until last Friday that I had the opportunity to meet that Green Party Minister in the Republic. As I said to him, it was a glorious morning in Dublin, and I had not been in Dublin for 22 or 23 years.

**Mr Shannon:** You were there protesting.

**The Minister of the Environment:** That was about 23 years ago. At least I had the opportunity to dispel the myth that is sometimes believed by people on my side, which is summed up in the old saying: "We will never forsake the blue skies of Ulster for the grey mist of an Irish Republic"

Indeed, I found that the skies were blue down there as well. *[Laughter.]* I intimated that to the Minister in my opening remarks to him, and I think that he was quite pleased to hear such a positive comment.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that the Minister espouses such green policies, does he think that he and Mr Gormley might save not only this island, but the whole planet?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I am neither Barack Obama nor Gordon Brown, both of whom think that they are Superman and that they are going to save the world. My aspirations for a working relationship with the Minister in the Republic are probably more mundane, practical, and much more achievable than saving the world, because there are a lot of cross-border issues that we need to deal with. Indeed, on Friday, I made it clear to the Minister that, although I have no great love for the formal structures of North/South Ministerial Council meetings — and the mandate for those meetings is fairly limited anyway — I would prefer it if we were to have

bilateral meetings whenever problems arise, so that we can deal with them in a comprehensive way.

I assure the House, as I have done before, that there are issues on both sides of the border in which we have a common interest. When those issues can be dealt with by Ministers meeting and reaching agreement, I am more than happy to participate.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Minister of the Environment for regaling the House with his previous visit to Dublin, which I believe was to promote “Ulster Says No” posters. Perhaps, given his new environmental responsibilities, he may not have been doing that on his latest visit.

Will the Minister detail what co-operation he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in the fight against illegal fuel launderers and smugglers? Furthermore, will he detail the extent of environmental damage caused as a result of fuel launderers dumping chemical residue? Moreover, will he advise the House whether he is completely satisfied with the level of co-operation that he and his Department are receiving in the tracing of illegal dumping of waste material in Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I do not wish to say too much about what happened at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, not because I wish to keep the details secret but because I will be making a statement about it next week. It would be discourteous to the House to give details now. Next week, I will be quite happy to receive detailed questions about what was discussed at the meeting.

It is sufficient to say that three issues were discussed: joint research, and the possible adoption of a common database; river basin management; and the dumping of illegal waste, originating in the Republic of Ireland, on sites in Northern Ireland. I will be happy to give a fuller report on those issues next week.

**Mr Ross:** Cross-border co-operation on practical measures is very important. However, is it not the case that on many wider environmental issues — such as those emanating from the Kyoto protocol or EU directives — the Minister’s Department has a very limited role to play in relation to cross-border co-operation? It is our national Government, at Westminster, which takes the lead role.

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Member is quite right. Those are member state commitments, and there is not a great cross-border role in dealing with those issues.

I hold totally different views from my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland on the causes of climate change and on the ability of Governments to do anything about changing what is happening to our climate. However, as I travelled to Dublin following a long period of

absence, I noticed that a number of new roads had been built — new roads that facilitate more cars and increase CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The Ministers in the Republic were quite rightly proud of the road network that they have around Dublin, and there seemed to be no sense of irony that in creating it that they were probably producing a lot more CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than in the past.

## Environmentally Sensitive Sites

5. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of landowners with whom his Department has entered into management schemes for the protection of environmentally sensitive sites. (AQO 2370/09)

## Areas of Special Scientific Interest

8. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the importance of declaring new Areas of Special Scientific Interest, as well as maintaining and protecting existing ones, as valuable havens for wildlife species at risk from the effects of climate change. (AQO 2373/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** With your permission Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 8 together. I consider areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) to be a cornerstone of the nature conservation effort in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland environment agency has a statutory duty under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 to declare qualifying areas of land as ASSIs.

The Order also requires the agency to ensure that ASSIs are afforded appropriate protection and are managed in a manner that will secure the continued existence of the scientific interest for which they have been declared. Landowners in ASSIs are invited to enter into management agreements under the NIEA’s management of sensitive sites scheme, and there are 96 of those agreements in place.

**Mr P J Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he explain why more than £200,000, earmarked for those schemes, was not taken up by landowners during the current year?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I have heard that that was the case and I checked up on it, because I was very concerned.

Apart from anything else, the Finance Minister, Nigel Dodds, has sought to ensure that Departments have spent all the money that they committed under particular Budget headings. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has a budget of £500,000 for the management of sensitive sites, and all of that money has been spent. That is the up-to-date position as of lunchtime today. If

the Member is in receipt of information that says otherwise, I would be more than happy to receive it.

3.30 pm

**Mr W Clarke:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister inform the House what species of wildlife are under threat due to climate change?

**The Minister of the Environment:** There are no species under threat as a result of climate change. Some people have argued that the habitats of some species of wildlife are under threat, and alarmists have claimed that up to 500,000 species might be under threat. They state that an increase of 2°C will put a lot of species at risk. However, not one species has been lost over the past 100 years — during which time the average temperature rose by almost 2°C. The Member should check the accuracy of some of the alarmists' stories before he gets too concerned.

## FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

### House Repossessions

1. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to address houses being repossessed. (AQO 2386/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds):** As the Member for South Antrim will be aware, the responsibility for housing matters rests with the Minister for Social Development. With regard to actions to address house repossessions, the Department for Social Development (DSD) recently submitted a business case for a mortgage-rescue package. That will be assessed to ensure that it represents value for money and is affordable.

**Mr Burns:** Can the Minister tell the House why he has been unable to find the money to fund the Government-run mortgage-rescue scheme, even though he seems to be a keen supporter of the idea?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I have not found the money to fund the scheme, because the business case for it was submitted so recently; the Member needs to take that up with the Minister for Social Development. As he is as keen as I am on the mortgage-rescue scheme, he will want the Department that is advocating it to treat it as a priority. I expect the Department that is responsible for housing matters to put resources into the mortgage-rescue scheme, as, I am sure, does Mr Burns. He cannot expect my Department to treat the scheme as a priority, if the Department for Social Development does not give it priority. That stands to reason.

Those matters will be considered when the business case has been assessed properly. Like all business cases, it will be assessed to establish whether the scheme will be effective and offers value for money. Those discussions are continuing, and, no doubt, the case will be processed in due course.

In answer to the Member's question, the business case was received so recently that it would have been improper to do anything before it was subject to due process.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that banks and financial institutions could, and should, provide effective relief to mortgage holders who are unable to maintain their payment system, as a direct consequence of the downturn?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The question that I answered previously related to possible assistance from the Executive, and that money will come out of public finances and public resources. There are, therefore, other competing demands and pressures on those, so it is important that the banks, building societies and other financial institutions do their bit for households and people who are facing difficulties at this time.

Times are difficult, and money is tight for people. Public bodies, such as the Rate Collection Agency, are discovering that in their efforts to collect money. Therefore we have to be sensitive to those issues.

I am aware that actions have been taken at a UK level and that new protocols are being considered by the courts in relation to showing that certain actions have been taken by lenders before an order for repossession — which is the ultimate recourse — is given. Those new protocols also state that there should be a minimum time before orders are sought. There is a duty on us all — not least on financial institutions such as banks and building societies — to do what we can to help those who face difficulties as a result of the severe challenges that confront us all.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for his very detailed responses and for outlining some of the actions that are being taken. Everyone in the Chamber is alarmed at the frightening increase in the rate of repossessions in Northern Ireland. Given his discussions with representatives of banks and building societies, can the Minister confirm what feedback he has received from those organisations? Will the Minister outline whether there are any actions beyond his remit that other Ministers can take to help him to stop repossessions?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Member's question relates to the first question about whether I could provide more money to fund the Government-run mortgage rescue scheme, but I do not

provide such money; the Executive do. Therefore, if other Ministers feel that this is an important issue that should be made a priority, no doubt they will want to contribute some of the finances from their budgets to schemes providing help and assistance. It will be interesting to see whether other Ministers attach the same importance to the issue.

The Member asked what else is being done. Earlier, I referred to actions that are being taken at a UK level. The homeowner mortgage-support scheme enables households that experience a significant but temporary loss of income to defer a portion of interest payments on their mortgage for up to two years. The Government will guarantee the deferred interest payment in return for banks' participation in the scheme.

The support for mortgage interest scheme entitles homeowners on income support, income-based jobseekers allowance or income-based employment and support allowance to support on their mortgage interest payments after 13 weeks. Some of the details of those schemes are still being worked through at a UK level, but those measures will be helpful, as will some of the other actions that I mentioned. In our discussions the importance of ensuring that consideration be given to people who are suffering temporary but severe difficulties in paying mortgages was impressed upon the banks and other financial institutions.

## Electronic Tendering System

2. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the benefits to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) resulting from the launch of the new electronic tendering system.  
(AQO 2387/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The new web-based electronic tendering portal, eSourcing NI, will have benefits for small and medium-sized enterprises; it will provide a one-stop-shop for all the Central Procurement Directorate's tendering opportunities, which are now available online 24/7. There is a supplier online help service, which is backed up with a phone helpline. Suppliers can register their details online once instead of having to provide the same information for each competition. The other centres of procurement expertise (CoPEs) will introduce the portal over the next year, and it is expected that by the end of 2009 all central Government contracting opportunities will be available on the portal.

Those changes will make it significantly easier for our small and medium-sized enterprises to identify future tendering competitions, and will mean that submitting tender responses to those opportunities will require less time and resources.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Minister for his response. It is important when dealing with such matters to have joined-up government and for schemes to be rolled out across all areas. Can the Minister confirm that eSourcing NI will be used across all the centres of procurement expertise?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I thank the Member for his question. I know that that issue is a source of interest, particularly to the members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. It is also important to local firms and businesses in the economic downturn, given that £2.2 billion will be spent on procurement this year alone, with some £1.5 billion being spent on capital. I can confirm to the House that all centres of procurement expertise will be using the common portal by early 2010 — that was agreed at the last procurement board, which I chaired.

It is important that there should be a joined-up approach right across Government, and that all central Government contracts should be available in one single portal. That will make it much easier for our small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular, to access the information and cut time, money and resources that would otherwise have to be spent doing it individually. It is positive for Northern Ireland business.

**Mr O'Loan:** I accept what the Minister said. However, for all the increased capital expenditure, the picture from the point of view of SMEs as I see it, does not appear to be as positive as that. SMEs do not feel that they are part of a public procurement system that is working with them and for them. Does the Minister recognise the picture that I am describing, and does he see meaningful ways in which the system can be made to operate better, so that the SMEs can describe the situation differently?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I am grateful for the Member's recognition of the capital spend that is happening. It is 30% greater this year than the final out-turn position for 2007-08, which is significant. When one considers that 90% of that is going to local companies — and the vast majority of Northern Ireland's companies are small and medium-sized enterprises per se — that gives an indication of the commitment that I have to our small and medium-sized enterprises.

The Member raised a point that has been raised by a lot by firms, businesses and Members. I am determined that centres of procurement expertise recognise the importance of SMEs — and I believe that they do. They encourage SMEs to join together as consortia to bid for contracts or look for opportunities within supply chains. The Member will be aware that Government clients are required to advertise publicly all construction procurement opportunities estimated to

exceed £30,000 for construction work and £5,000 for construction-related services.

I referred to the eSourcingNI portal, which will be an enormous help to Northern Ireland companies. The recently established construction industry forum and procurement task group, which was set up and meets regularly, is considering how further to maximise the opportunities for SMEs in Northern Ireland to bid for, or benefit from, public-sector construction contracts.

**Mr Gardiner:** In the Minister's reply to my question for written answer — AWQ 5660/09 — he was unable to give me details of the small and medium-sized firms that he has told the House are now able to access the Government's tendering process. How was he able to tell the House that they could access tendering processes if his Department was not able to tell me who they were? Surely his Department has computerised databases.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I will look into that matter. My Department tries to be as open and transparent as possible, and that fact has been commented on. It may well be, given the vast amount of procurement contracts — £2.2 billion per annum — that the cost of listing every individual company may be astronomical. However, I hope that the Member will be reassured by the actions that my Department is taking already, with 90% of Government procurement projects going to Northern Ireland firms, compared to some 50% in Wales. Northern Ireland's performance is much better. However, not only do I want it to be better — although it is significantly better than other devolved areas — I want it to be the best that it can possibly be. It is important for us to do what we can to ensure that local companies have that access.

Given the amount of procurement value out there, I hope that the Member is reassured by the fact that Northern Ireland companies are getting 90% of that procurement and, given the fact that the vast majority of those companies are small and medium-sized enterprises, that that will also go a long way to reassure him on that point. I am grateful for the Member's nod of acknowledgement.

3.45 pm

**Ms Anderson:** Last week, I facilitated a meeting with the Central Procurement Directorate and SMEs in Derry. They outlined a string of difficulties that they experienced when they tried to secure contracts. Given what the Minister told us about the website and the portal, does he agree that it is important to monitor whether SMEs find it easier to succeed in the procurement process and to secure contracts? Will the process that the Minister outlined be monitored so that SMEs can be assured that they will be able to secure contracts?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** It is not a question of whether that situation will be monitored: it is continuously monitored. The Construction Industry

Forum Procurement Task Group meets fortnightly to discuss all those issues with the construction industry and businesses, so it directly engages with Government on those issues. Public-sector procurement procedures are highly regulated according to UK national law and through European Union directives with which we must comply.

The measures that we have taken — backed up by facts — indicate that Northern Ireland firms and companies are already accessing considerable benefits from public procurement. I hope that the measures will reassure people that substantial work is being done; we take nothing for granted, however. We will continue to work to ensure that local companies can access the best-possible procurement opportunities.

There will also be companies in Northern Ireland that will rightly want to access opportunities outside Northern Ireland. A short while ago, we received the very welcome news that two of our leading developers and construction companies in Northern Ireland won work in Scotland. I do not know whether that will provoke questions in the Scottish Parliament about work not going to Scottish construction companies, but there are opportunities for Northern Ireland firms. When the portal is fully up and running, it will provide information on a UK-wide basis. Companies from Northern Ireland will be able to see opportunities arise from the Olympic Games.

I am delighted that Northern Ireland companies are benefiting from public-procurement opportunities in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

### Capital Expenditure 2008-09

3. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the expenditure on major capital projects in 2008/09. (AQO 2388/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The latest forecast outturn returns from Departments indicate that they expect to undertake net capital investment of £1.5 billion in 2008-09. Capital investment covers a wide range of expenditure and thousands of individual projects. Some of the major projects that have been taken forward this year are in respect of transport. There are a number of major roads capital investments that amount to more than £90 million, as well as some £37 million on strategic-road improvements and £38 million on local transport and safety measures.

In relation to education, two major PPP projects were completed this year involving £31 million for the Holy Cross College Project in Strabane and £24 million for the Bangor and Nendrum project. The Downe Hospital capital project has also progressed, with almost £26 million in investment due by the end of the year, and about £19 million for phase A of the

redevelopment of the Ulster Hospital. Those examples are only a few of the numerous improvements that are being made in our capital infrastructure by the Executive to support the better delivery of public services across Northern Ireland.

**Mr G Robinson:** Will the Minister outline the degree to which local companies are benefiting from the unprecedented level of Government expenditure on special projects this year?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I am grateful to the Member for his question. It touches on some of the issues that we discussed earlier in this Question Time in relation to opportunities for local companies. I re-emphasise that, in relation to the indications that have been given to the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), more than 90% of Government construction contracts have been awarded to local companies in this financial year. That compares very favourably with other devolved regions.

Many Northern Ireland firms benefit considerably from participation in framework agreements. For instance, six Northern Ireland construction firms, supported by four local mechanical and electrical subcontractors, supply 100% of the minor building works and civil engineering contracts operated by CPD. Therefore, that is good news. There are also opportunities for architectural and quantity surveying practices, and so forth. Again, I hope that that gives the Member some reassurance.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the fact that the Minister listed all the capital builds that will take place, but has there been any reduction in the planned capital spend in 2009-2010 since the three-year Budget was announced? Indeed, are the predicted returns from asset sales in the Budget tied to particular capital schemes, and, if so, what is his plan to replace that money? In particular, is there any information on projects to rebuild schools?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Member will have to take up the issue of school rebuild projects with the Department of Education. Each Minister and Department are responsible for delivering their side of the investment strategy, and so on.

As regards asset capital realisation, the Member will be aware, as we all are, of the downturn in the property market. She asked if there have been any reductions in particular areas. As we know, the Workplace 2010 project did not proceed, the fundamental reason being that the cost of money went up and the value of property went down. It would have been foolish for some of the planned asset realisation across a number of Departments to proceed given the current climate. It made sense not to proceed, given that the market was low. However, those assets remain, and they will, in due course — subject to business cases, etc — be available for the realisation of capital sums in the future.

It is a bit like the decisions facing any business or household — if they were able to sell assets and use the money to do other things, they would do so. However, given the current climate, it makes no sense to do that. Our emphasis has been on the fact that the vast majority of the investment in capital projects for this year does not depend on asset sales. It is estimated that £1.5 billion net and £1.6 billion gross will be spent this year, and that is a considerable increase on last year of some 30%. Indeed, it is about 120% more than was spent under direct rule; so by any stretch of the imagination, even with the downturn in the property market, that is a considerable achievement across all Departments.

**Dr Farry:** The Minister talked about £1.6 billion in gross capital expenditure for this financial year. However, the investment strategy mentions £1.8 billion in gross capital expenditure, as does the Budget. What assurances can he give us that, unlike what happened this year, the target gross expenditure figures in the investment strategy over the next two financial years will be met? What is the current status of the figures in the investment strategy, given that the Budget was knocked off course by the inability to realise capital sales?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I am somewhat at a loss to understand that question — I have already said that roughly £175 million has been accounted for as a result of the Workplace 2010 project not proceeding. I am a bit puzzled: is the Member saying that in order to make up that amount we should simply sell off Government assets, property and infrastructure — perhaps more than we were going to sell? That does not make any sense. The Public Accounts Committee, the Audit Committee and the rest would fall on us like a ton of bricks — and rightly so — if we were simply seen to flog off assets when the market is at its lowest.

The sensible approach is to wait until the market recovers, retain the assets and deal with them when the market is more buoyant. Such an approach will enable us to use that money more wisely. That is what one would do when dealing with household expenditure or one's business — and I hope that that is what Dr Farry would do when dealing with his finances. I do not know whether to assume from his question that that is the case. However, the net investment this year is a massive increase on last year, and certainly on the investment made under direct rule, and it is not dependent on capital receipts.

## Bank Responses to Government Initiatives

4. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the response of banks to recent Government initiatives. (AQO 2389/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I warmly welcome the Ulster Bank's announcement that it has set up a £250 million regional fund to support small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland throughout 2009. I encourage other local banks to follow that example as a matter of urgency. I understand that all four major local banks are now engaged with the European Investment Bank in rolling out loan schemes for small and medium-sized enterprises. I will continue to press the local banks to take full advantage of the available UK Government and European Commission initiatives.

**Mr Bresland:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he satisfied that the Government are doing enough to encourage banks to help businesses and households?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The actions of the Government and banks provoke a considerable amount of discussion. That discussion is not always favourable towards the banks by any stretch of the imagination, and, indeed, it is not always favourable about the Government either. The details of some of the schemes that have been announced at UK level are still being worked through. We want those schemes to be rolled out as quickly as possible, not least the working capital scheme — announced by Lord Mandelson in January — the enterprise finance guarantee scheme and the capital-for-enterprise fund, which is designed to ensure investment in small businesses that need equity.

My colleagues and I continue to meet the banks regularly in order to encourage them to do what they can to help small businesses and households through this very difficult time, not least by extending credit and acting as banks by providing companies with liquidity and cash.

**Mr Neeson:** Like the Minister, I also welcome the intervention of the Ulster Bank and encourage other banks to follow suit. Will the Minister also encourage banks to supply mortgages, particularly to young people who are trying to get onto the property ladder? I believe that there is evidence that the housing market is beginning to restore itself to some extent, and it is important that the banks play their part.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Member has raised an important point. I do not want to speculate or talk up the property market, because that always leads to press headlines that can be interpreted one way or the other. One hears reports from banks and financial institutions about the current state of play, and let us hope that the local property market is stabilising.

Nevertheless, the Member is right to point to the importance of banks and financial institutions providing help, particularly by giving mortgages to first-time buyers. There has been discussion with the

banks on that important issue, and the Executive are also playing their part by supporting the co-ownership scheme, which is helping many people to get onto the property market for the first time.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. There has been much talk about the huge amount of public money that has been poured into the banks. As the Minister said, the Ulster Bank has come forward with proposals, and, last week, we heard about the help that is being given to people who are in debt. Is the Minister confident that banks and financial institutions are now treating their personal customers and businesses fairly?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I do not have responsibility for the banking sector, and, as the Minister, it is difficult for me to comment on the wide range of banks that deal with all sorts of clients individually. What I will say is that the banks have been prepared to meet Ministers and others at Executive level to discuss the relevant matters in considerable detail. Representatives of the banks have appeared before the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and it is important that that level of engagement continues.

4.00 pm

One of the issues that I raised is that of the European Investment Bank, which makes money available for businesses. Two of our banks are owned by companies that are based in the Irish Republic. It is important that some of the money given for business through those banks is made available to businesses in Northern Ireland, and that it does not disappear entirely into the Irish Republic.

## Northern Ireland Direct

5. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the launch of Northern Ireland Direct. (AQO 2390/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** NI Direct is an important part of the Civil Service reform programme which aims to improve citizens' access to Government information and services. Phase 1 of the NI Direct programme consists of three elements: the three-digit contact number for access to a selection of services; the new flooding incident line — 0300 2000100 — which has been operational since the turn of the year; and NI Direct Online, which is a single website that brings together information from all Civil Service Departments and agencies.

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

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Voting Registration Process

#### *Debate resumed on motion:*

That this Assembly notes with concern the difficulties that many people, particularly young people, are experiencing when trying to register to vote; further notes that the Chief Electoral Officer has decided to seek additional information in all cases, despite the fact that all applicants submit personal identifiers and sign a declaration; and calls on the Secretary of State and the Electoral Office to simplify the registration process as a matter of urgency. — *[Mr McKay]*

**Mr Shannon:** The vote for everyone is not something that has always been available, and it is not something that should be taken for granted or abused. One need only look at the sham that took place recently in Zimbabwe to understand that it is vital that we have an independent Electoral Commission to ensure that all results are fair. I begin by commending the hard work that is put in, and stress that I am not attacking the Electoral Commission, which does an excellent job. There is, however, a need for some change.

I am concerned at some of the comments made in the Chamber today. They have been inflammatory and unhelpful, and some of them have come from the party opposite.

Over the years, there has been abuse of the system, and that raises concerns. In my constituency, some of the people whom I represent have also been disenfranchised and deprived of the opportunity to vote.

All Members are privileged to have been elected to this Chamber, and all are more than aware of the issues that affect the voting process. A few of us have had constituents approach us on election day, or the day before the election, saying that they are unable to vote because there has been a problem with the regulations. Ineffably, we are forced to tell them that there is nothing to be done and that they are unable to vote.

Although my party was of a mind to support the motion at the start of the debate, having listened to some of the scurrilous comments made, it is now of a mind to oppose it.

Ther er a hael lok o' proablins that ries oot o' tha present system. Yin a' caun mien fae tha laust roon o' voetin, was twau yung fowk whau haud jist mov'd hoose a' minth afoer tha electshins an they haud boucht ther haem regestar fae ther new address an didnae sen aff ther mail tae sae that they cud nae langer voet. Baith o' theim wunt oot oan electshin dae but wurny alood tae voet An it is this soart o' thing that

haes tae be put aricht. Fowk must unnerstuan hoo they caun mak shair that they caun keep ther voet.

Many problems arise with the current system. During the last round of voting, I recall the case of a young couple who had moved house a month before the election. Unfortunately, the couple who had bought their home registered from their new address and did not forward mail which contained notices warning them that they could not vote. They went out to vote on election day, but were not allowed to. Such situations must be clarified, and people must understand how they can ensure that they keep the right to vote.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the point that I raised in an earlier intervention was for the benefit of everyone? The letters that are sent out are very complex. The fact that the Area Electoral Office in Banbridge was not fully aware of what was included in the letter, and could not give an adequate explanation as to how such voters could stay on the register, is significant.

**Mr Shannon:** I am aware of what the Member said, though I am unable to speak for Banbridge. Last week, I contacted the Area Electoral Office in Newtownards to clarify a few matters. I conveyed my requests and concerns into the system to effect change, which is important. I will outline those circumstances now, because they must be addressed.

The first is the matter of electoral ID. If one does not drive or have a passport, he or she must have an alternative form of photographic ID. The Electoral Commission will provide that. However, for example, a voter who has just turned 18, lives in Killyleagh in my constituency, and wishes to vote for Diane Dodds in the upcoming elections as a strong candidate for Europe must somehow make his way up to Newtownards to get the ID, with various documents that can be hard to obtain for someone who lives at home without a credit card or bill to his name. I have conveyed that example to the Electoral Office in Newtownards.

Surely there must be other ways of applying — for example, a photograph signed by a notary is acceptable to the Identity and Passport Service. I know that that is one of the issues being discussed and looked at. The other side of the coin is that all the information is available online, yet not everyone in the Province has access to, or the ability to use, the Internet. When people are told to get the application form online, that can also be problem. I have made the Electoral Commission aware of the issue.

With the European elections coming up, it is more important than ever to ensure that everyone who has a desire to vote will have the ability to vote. That needs to be achieved as a matter of urgency through a campaign of awareness and, in the background, a review and appraisal of the way that things are currently done.

The other issue that I would like to bring to Members' attention —

**Mrs Long:** Does the Member agree that although most of those who have spoken in the debate agree that there are issues around the electoral registration process, it was really quite scurrilous of some Members to insinuate that there was a deliberate attempt by the Electoral Office to try to disenfranchise particular political groups from being able to exercise their vote? That was a reckless comment to make in the current context.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree absolutely, and that is one reason why we will not be supporting the motion.

I am very conscious of time and, unfortunately, I am going to be beaten by it; however, I want to make one more comment. In the last election in the United States, young people were purposely targeted in order to try to get them to vote. There was an excellent and vivid advertising campaign with various celebrities having their mouths taped shut. The message was clear: no vote, no say. That is what they said in America, and it could be that there might be somebody in the Chamber to whom that should apply; however, I would never make any comment in relation to that. *[Interruption.]*

We need a way forward. It is a matter of moving in that direction. Although we want change and have conveyed that to the Electoral Commission —

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

**Mr Shannon:** I urge Members not to support the motion for the very reasons that have come out in their own Members' attempts to promote it; they have got it wrong.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I would discourage Members from kick-starting the European election campaign during the debate.

**Mr Elliott:** I certainly would not engage in such tactics. It is good to follow Mr Shannon and to hear the theories that either he has put forward, or that somebody else has put forward and he has portrayed. Clearly, people could have some sympathy with the issues surrounding the motion, and Mr Shannon referred to that. However, I feel that the tone of some of the debate did go downhill somewhat badly.

We all know why the legislation had to be brought in in the first place, and why we need those rules and regulations. To be blunt, it is because of voter fraud at times, and that has been the case. Although we may not be able to identify any such cases, it is clear, even to the dogs in the street, that there have been difficulties with the process. It is unfortunate that the party that has brought forward the motion did not adhere to some

of the ongoing good practices. If it had, we may not have run into the difficulties that we have.

I want to focus on young people. It is mentioned in the motion that we need more young people to get on the electoral register, and I think that that is the basis of the motion. In 2007, I understand that only 244 young people came on the electoral register. In 2008, 7,738 young people came on the register. I hope that those figures are accurate, but I am quite happy to withdraw them if they are not. However, I know that there was a huge increase last year, and one of the reasons for that was the policy and the process that took place with the schools. The vast majority of schools in the Province signed up to that process and allowed the Electoral Office to canvas, and carry out surveys, in schools in order to register many of the young people who were due to come on the electoral register.

That was key to the huge increase last year. Such areas must be developed and progressed. Instead of just having a widespread —

**Lord Morrow:** I agree with the Member and with other Members who have said that, on reading the motion, it seems quite inoffensive. However, the words that have been expressed in the debate tell a completely different story. It seems that some Members want to portray the image that a certain section of the community is being deprived or that jackboot tactics are being used. I hope that that impression will not go out from the Assembly, because nothing could be further from the truth. The Members who said that should be big enough to withdraw those remarks. When members of my party read the motion, we were prepared to support it, but we will not do so because of the views that have been expressed in the House.

**Mr Shannon:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Elliott:** Yes, but I ask the Member to be brief.

**Mr Shannon:** The Member made a good point about registration in secondary schools; the number of people who registered increased by 31,000. The Electoral Commission put that idea forward, and it has been successful. Does he agree that such ideas can make a difference when people register, especially young people?

**Mr Elliott:** I certainly agree, and I also welcome Lord Morrow's comments. The Ulster Unionist Party saw some positives in the motion, but the tone of the debate from Members on the other side of the Chamber has made it go downhill. Those people need to examine their overall voting practices. In a court judgement, a judge said:

"The incidents which took place at this polling station at the time when the poll should have closed were extremely reprehensible."

He continued:

"nothing can excuse the scenes of threatening intimidation which took place, brought into being by supporters of the candidate who was eventually successful."

He was referring to the election of the Sinn Féin candidate, Michelle Gildernew, and to the Garrison polling station in 2001. Sinn Féin has to stand up and try to defend such incidents. If it tries to defend such behaviour, pity help the rest of us who have to deal with the proper electoral procedure and have to go through the proper system at elections.

I do not want to go back to the slogan to which some Irish republicans adhere: "vote early, vote often". I think that they want to get back to that and to a system that is free and easy for them to abuse. I have no difficulty with simplification, but with simplification comes abuse of the system. I do not want to see that, and that is what concerns me about the motion — that, once again, they will abuse the electoral system and the democratic right of the people of the Province.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that interventions should be short, sharp and to the point.

**Mr O'Loan:** There is some point to the motion, but it is unfortunate that the SDLP amendment and the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, which had merit, were not selected. The wording of the motion is not perfect, and, as has been said, much of what has been said in support of it has been way over the top. One can certainly spoil a case by overstating it, and when Miss Martina "no, I will not give way" Anderson equated the present conduct of the Chief Electoral Officer with the discriminatory practices of former unionist Governments in Northern Ireland, she took the debate to an absurd level. She should not expect her case to be taken seriously when she uses that kind of language.

**Mr McKay:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Loan:** When I asked the person to whom I referred, Martina Anderson, to give way, she did not give way, so I do not propose to give way to a Member from Sinn Féin. I think that the truth hurts a little bit, which is why there are squeals from certain other Benches.

4.15 pm

The Electoral Office's business plan for 2008-09 states that its objectives are to ensure that the electoral register remains at its current high level of accuracy and that its comprehensiveness continues to increase. I want to focus on those two words: the "accuracy" and "comprehensiveness" of the register. Those represent the Chief Electoral Officer's tasks.

The next full canvass is due to take place in 2010-11. Therefore, in order to ensure that those objectives are met, the office must use other methods at present. The Chief Electoral Officer's intention is most

certainly not to restrict access to the electoral register: anyone who has studied the facts would know that his intention is the exact opposite.

Obviously, the inclusion of young people is critical to the register's comprehensiveness. Of course, they have a fundamental right to be registered. The schools initiative has been mentioned. The Electoral Office now has the right to acquire the names, addresses and dates of birth of all pupils who are over 16 years of age. That initiative — working in conjunction with schools — has been excellent. A large number of young people has been registered; therefore, there are no problems with their personal identities. All Members should encourage and give their total co-operation to that initiative.

The Electoral Office's target was to publish a revised register of electors, which had 11,500 more names, by December 2008. It has more than achieved that target. Its objective was for the register to be at least as accurate as that of December 2007. It should be noted that that target will result in a register that is 86% comprehensive. Therefore, there is still work to be done to ensure that it is fully comprehensive. Even maintaining the current register's accuracy requires making 150,000 changes to it. A lot of work is required to achieve that.

It has been established that there is no problem in identifying school attenders. As regards college students, they often have student loans and bank accounts, which provide a form of identification. If a student lives at home and is under 21 years of age, the Electoral Office will accept a parental declaration of his or her identity. Indeed, it is possible for anyone of any age who does not have the normal identifiers available to him or her to get a simple declaration from a recognised member of the community — a person from the same kind of list of people who can sign a passport application form. That will be accepted by the Electoral Office.

It is possible that there has not been enough communication of those basic facts; certain Assembly Members ought to have such facts at their disposal before they comment on such matters. There may also be an issue as regards getting that information out to the public. That point can be made fairly to the Electoral Office.

As regards large households, it is the case that they may give some *prima facie* grounds for the Electoral Office to look at certain situations. It is possible for a family to move house and to not be taken off the register at that location when a new family moves in. In the case of migrant workers, people may no longer live at an address, but may still be registered there. It is proper for the Electoral Office to look into the issue. I have been told that its current initiative is to write to

households with more than eight members. Obviously, that must be done with considerable sensitivity. Perhaps, there are issues with the phraseology that the Electoral Office uses in its letters.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close, please.

**Mr O'Loan:** Finally, it is a privilege as well as a right to be included on the electoral register and, therefore, to be able to vote. That places a duty on the elector who wants to be on the electoral register.

**Ms Purvis:** On my recent trip to the US, I heard a story about voter registration that relates to the current discussion. In Boston, most houses are built to accommodate two or three families, with each family occupying its own floor of the building. Those houses are known locally as "triple deckers". Not long ago, a President of the Massachusetts Senate, who was also a senior official in the United States Democratic Party, was asked by a journalist why more than 100 people were registered to vote in one triple decker in his constituency. He replied that it was because the top floor was vacant.

That suggests that Northern Ireland is not the only place with a presumed history of abusing the right to vote; we are not the only country that has experienced the medical miracle of the dead voting and of the living voting more than once.

However, an important decision must be made that is a fundamental element of the peace process and the political transformation of our society: is our democratic process, and the voter registration list that facilitates it, about inclusion or exclusion? Where is our achievement? Is it that the largest possible percentage of the population can exercise its right to vote or is it keeping the largest number of ineligible voters off the list? Which is our guiding principle? Since the start of the peace process, Westminster, in particular, has taken the latter approach. Voters who have attempted to register have been presumed guilty and have had to provide evidence of their innocence, and that has led to problems.

Since the implementation of the changes in legislation, voter registration has decreased significantly and turnout at elections is plummeting. Students and people from working-class and deprived communities are not registering in high numbers. The standard of proof is only one hurdle to registration; the other major problem is the reasons for which the voter list can be used in addition to validating a person's right to vote. Those additional functions include what the regulations refer to as crime prevention and detection.

As is well known, the Progressive Unionist Party supports law and order and crime prevention and detection. Given the state of the country's finances, benefit fraud is a problem that we cannot afford and

which must be addressed. However, the voter registration process is not the appropriate place to do that. It is fair enough that Government agencies check data files using information that citizens have willingly provided in order to identify attempts at fraud. However, the voter list must not be included in such data; it should be for the sole purpose of the electoral process.

The other problem is that credit-reference agencies can purchase the voter list to check a person's credit history and borrowing eligibility. When did we decide that being a consumer holds the same venerable status as being a citizen? Our voter list is no longer a register of citizens that confirms and validates their legal right to participate in a country's democratic processes; it is now a credit report that can be used not only to check whether a person is eligible to cast a ballot but whether a person is eligible to buy a new sofa. The legislation that governs voter registration has created real disincentives for people — particularly the young — to register freely and willingly. We should be concerned, but not surprised, that that has affected voter turnout at elections.

I encourage those parties that are represented at Westminster to take an entirely different approach to the legislation that affects voter registration and voting in Northern Ireland. The party that proposed the motion has a responsibility to resolve some of the problems that have been outlined during the debate, and it could do so by taking its seats at Westminster. The process for voter registration and voting must be open and inclusive and protected from all life's other harassments. It should not be an exclusive process — our citizens already deal with enough of those.

**Dr McDonnell:** The issue in the motion affects every parliamentary constituency and every electoral ward in Northern Ireland, and I thank the Members who brought the matter to the Floor of the House.

A robust voter registration system is, without question, the foundation of a healthy and properly functioning democracy, and the voter registration process is a vital vehicle for ensuring that people can access the electoral process. However, to perform that function the system must be user-friendly. I am concerned that in the drive to combat past electoral fraud we are in serious danger of making the voter registration process too complicated, with the result that the system appears to be deterring many people from registering to vote.

The system is robust, but it must be allowed to work. People whose job it is to simplify registration must not place obstacles in the system's way. I have been told that, despite my considerable efforts and those of my colleagues to work with the electoral office to encourage voter registration, thousands of people in my constituency are not on the electoral register.

However, when we have done so, many obstacles have been put in our way and in the way of those who have tried to be included on the register. I am talking about people who have moved house or who have missed out somehow or other when the register was being prepared.

We must ask ourselves why so many people are not on the register, and what factors are preventing them from being included. I have personally knocked on many doors across my constituency and distributed forms to people whom I discovered were not on the register, but time and time again those very same people have returned to me after filling in their forms to tell me that they are fed up with form-filling and sending in documents. Many of them even claim to have filled in the forms when the register was being prepared in the first place, and then, after filling in the forms yet again, they received letters requesting even more documentation to prove that they are who they say they are.

The perceived rigidity and prolific requirements of the voter-registration process are creating a negative relationship between those people and the electoral process. There is a danger of disenfranchising the very groups in our society most likely not to be registered. That includes young people, students, people with physical and mental disabilities, and those living in areas of high social deprivation.

I have recently seen at first hand the impact of rigorous voter-registration processes on young people living at home with their parents. Over the past number of weeks several families have contacted me to express their upset and disgust at receiving letters from the Electoral Office asking them to provide further proof — mid-cycle; those people are legitimately on the register, and were not supposed to be assessed again until 2011 — that they are entitled to stay on the register. They have already provided that necessary documentation to be included on the register in the first place.

In one case, the mother, father and five daughters who have lived at an address for over 30 years have been challenged and questioned. That is the result of procedural, administrative and bureaucratic decisions by the Chief Electoral Officer. I am not sure that there is anything in the legislation or in his instructions stating that he has to do that.

I am told that every individual in a household with seven residents over the age of 18 is being double-checked and treble-checked and asked to provide additional documentation to prove that they live at that address. That is not legitimate even in the case of a student, because — I am told — technically a student is entitled to register both at home and at their place of education, and can then choose where to vote,

depending on the timing of the election. If it is during term time they can vote at a polling station near to their university, and if it is during home time they can vote at home.

The difficulty is that many of those people are now facing demands to produce further evidence of identity and legitimacy within 14 days, or they will be struck off the register. It is important to take steps to reduce electoral fraud — I am not disputing that. I can understand that that may be, in a perverse way, motivating this course of action, but the way it is being approached means that young people and their parents feel that they are being singled out by the Electoral Office just because the young people happen to live at home with their parents. In many cases, those young people have no option but to live with their parents, rather than being caught in the rent trap.

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

**Dr McDonnell:** There are a lot of issues here.

**Mr Doherty:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Daithí McKay opened the debate this afternoon by pointing out the targeting by the Electoral Office of bigger households, the rule on three months' residency, and the provision for overseas registration. Then we had an extraordinary intervention by Mervyn Storey, only for it to be proven that the only person that has been charged with electoral fraud in this state is a member of his own party. This theme has been coming up regularly.

4.30 pm

**Lord Morrow:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Doherty:** Danny Kennedy from the —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Lord Morrow:** Did the Member say that the only person charged with electoral fraud was a member of Mervyn Storey's party? Is that what he said?

**Mr Doherty:** I said that that person was a member of the DUP.

**Lord Morrow:** Further to that point of order, is it in order for a Member to make such allegations in the House? If the Member is talking about the same person that I am referring to, then he is talking about a former member, which is distinctly different.

**Mr Doherty:** He became a former member after he was charged.

Danny Kennedy from the UUP said that the motion was not properly considered, that because of previous instances of fraud there was a need to be vigilant, and that simplification could undermine the integrity of the registration process. He then said that the process was 95% accurate, even though he did not substantiate that

figure, and he claimed that 84% of the people were on the register. He implied and hinted that the need for vigilance was because Sinn Féin had been involved in electoral fraud. However, he never once attempted to explain the growth of the Sinn Féin vote. That is because he cannot explain it — there is a myth around electoral fraud, and it is knocked back at every election as Sinn Féin gets bigger.

Pat Ramsey of the SDLP supported the motion and recognised the good work that the Electoral Commission has been doing for some time. He said that unnamed parties had engaged in electoral malpractice in previous times, but did not name those parties. Clearly, that leaves questions for people to deal with.

Stephen Farry of the Alliance Party said that he had sympathy with the motion. He said that the electoral process and the electoral register should be in independent hands. The problem is that the process is not in independent hands: it is in the hands of the NIO, which is controlled by the British Government, and is therefore not entirely independent.

**Dr Farry:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Doherty:** Yes.

**Dr Farry:** At the beginning of the debate, my party was minded to support the motion. Like other Members, we are concerned about some of the remarks that have been made in the debate. I have no doubt that some of the people who proposed the motion are sincere. However, before we, and others, can support the motion, we must have an assurance from its proposers that they are in no way, shape or form calling into question the integrity of the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff, and that although there may be problems with the way in which the process is applied, there is no overt agenda of discrimination against any section of society. If the Member can give such an assurance to the House on behalf of his party, the motion will have some prospect of success. I encourage him to make such remarks.

**Mr Doherty:** Members can make up their own minds about whether they want to support the motion. They will decide whether they will have the courage to stick with their convictions or buckle under pressure.

The Member went on to make a good point that the process has been made very difficult, especially for young people, to the point at which they are put off attempting to register. He said that he supported a review of those issues.

Martina Anderson highlighted the case of an elderly man who was fined 1p. She asked whether that was an example of the best use of public money and wanted to know what in God's name the Electoral Office was doing when it pursued that person. The most important point that she made was that 200,000 people are not on

the electoral register, and that that is a denial of their right to vote.

Jim Shannon commended the Electoral Commission, which everyone agreed with.

**Dr Farry:** It was set up by the British state.

**Mr Doherty:** Sorry?

**Dr Farry:** It was set up by the British state as well.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Please make your remarks —

**Mr Doherty:** When they do things right, we will praise them. *[Interruption.]* If they do things wrong, we will point it out to them.

Mr Shannon said that his party had considered supporting the motion but had changed its mind. Perhaps the truth hurts: there it is; we are here to deal with that. He said that the Electoral Office would have to deal with the difficulties that young people faced in obtaining photographic ID and that older people were not particularly used to the Internet.

Tom Elliott said that the dogs in the street know of fraud. I do not know about the dogs in the street, but the Electoral Office does not seem to know too much about it. He said that there has been a big increase in young people registering. He quoted some figures, but he did not give them a context or compare them with how many young people are not registered. At that point, Maurice Morrow intervened about the tone of the debate. Tom Elliott then used the phrase “vote early, vote often” — I used to think that that was a unionist saying.

Declan O’Loan said that there was some point to the motion and that Martina Anderson was standing up for those who were deprived of being on the register. I thought that she made her point very well, just as she did when she stood up for Derry. However, I was not sure whether Mr O’Loan was praising or attacking her.

Dawn Purvis talked about her visit to the United States, and she gave examples of the registration processes that are used there and of how empty flats are exploited. She was making the point that no process is 100% accurate, but we need to get nearer to that percentage before we can be in any way at ease in our minds about the issue.

She made a very clear point about presumptions of guilt being attached to people who apply to get on the register, rather than their being dealt with at face value. She also made the very good point that many such presumptions are targeted at people from deprived and urban areas in particular. She said that Westminster had a huge responsibility in that regard, and she urged Sinn Féin MPs to take their seats there and do something about the issue. I say to Dawn Purvis that that is not going to happen — Sinn Féin’s task is to build a

democracy on our island and to let that other big island handle itself.

Alasdair McDonnell said that the voter-registration process is too difficult and complicated and that questions on some forms were being asked over and over again. He said that that was directed particularly at young people, and he produced many examples to back up his case.

The Electoral Office is an agency of the NIO, and there is no doubt that it has targeted certain sections of the community. However, those sections are neither unionist nor republican or nationalist. Instead, the people who are being targeted and disenfranchised by the process are the poor and socially deprived, who live largely in urban areas. All Members have a collective responsibility to address that issue.

Sometimes we do not realise how the rest of the world sees the political process and the peace process in the North as a model for moving forward. The core of what has happened here over the past number of years has been the way that people have voted in huge numbers for the various parties. However, 200,000 people are not on the electoral register but are entitled to be. That is a huge indictment on the Electoral Office that must be rectified. The issue is not one of unionist versus nationalist or republican; it is about standing by the poor and the deprived in our community.

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 27; Noes 39.*

#### AYES

*Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr McKay.*

#### NOES

*Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Kennedy and Mr Shannon.*

*The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Ms Purvis, Mr B Wilson.*

*Question accordingly negatived.*

**Mr Kennedy:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not deeply ironic that the only party that voted in both Lobbies on the issue of electoral registration was the Alliance Party? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr Kennedy knows well that that is not a point of order. *[Laughter.]*

*Adjourned at 4.51 pm.*



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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 24 March 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### **Draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009**

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and  
Investment (Mrs Foster):** I beg to move

That the Draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

The statutory rule is being made under powers contained in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which prescribes that the 2009 Order must be laid in draft for approval by an affirmative resolution of the Assembly. The Order under discussion today is the culmination of a programme of work that involved close consultation with industry and other stakeholders on the development of the policy on renewable energy.

The changes were subject to a statutory consultation process that closed in December 2008. The primary powers for the amendments were established through the Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, which was approved by the Assembly in January 2009. The Order introduces important changes to the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO). By making NIRO more efficient and effective, the changes will better enable us to meet the targets on renewable electricity.

Similar changes are also being made to the renewable obligations in Scotland, England and Wales. The renewable obligations work in harmony across the United Kingdom, and, therefore, it is important that all changes are made at the same time.

Renewable energy is a vital part of the Department's strategy to tackle the two major challenges of ensuring a secure supply of energy for Northern Ireland and combating climate change. As Northern Ireland's main mechanism for encouraging new renewable electricity generation, it is crucial that NIRO is as effective as possible, and it has been successful so far. When NIRO was introduced in 2005, just under 3% of electricity

produced in Northern Ireland was renewable. Today, 7% of electricity produced and consumed in Northern Ireland is renewable, which is a higher percentage than ever before.

However, NIRO must deliver even more. I will soon consult on a new strategic energy framework that will contain proposals to set higher targets for renewable electricity, which is vital in securing Northern Ireland's energy supply and combating climate change.

The draft Order that is under consideration makes some fundamental changes to the NIRO, which will allow it to bring forward a higher level of renewables generation from a wide range of sources. The most significant of those changes is the introduction of banding. The NIRO was designed originally as a technology-neutral instrument, intended to pull through the most economic forms of renewable generation. It has delivered on that, and is proving to be particularly successful in bringing forward technologies such as onshore wind. However, it is never wise to rely wholly on one technology and to put all our eggs in one energy basket. That is why we do not rely solely on one fuel for conventional power generation, and it is also why we need a greater contribution from other renewable technologies.

Banding will enable us to provide higher levels of support to technologies that are further from market. Currently, each megawatt hour of eligible generation is awarded one renewables obligation certificate (ROC). A banded NIRO will mean that different technologies will get different numbers of ROCs. For example, anaerobic digestion will receive more ROCs than onshore wind. Furthermore, all microgenerators — defined as those that will generate a capacity of up to 50 kilowatts — will receive two ROCs for each megawatt hour, irrespective of technology.

Many Members will know that my Department consulted on keeping one ROC per megawatt hour for landfill gas in Northern Ireland, whereas the rest of the UK is banding down to one quarter ROC per megawatt hour. The consultation response has supported that position because of the relative lack of development of landfill gas compared with the rest of the UK where landfill gas is highly developed. It was on that basis that we in Northern Ireland applied for EU state-aid clearance. Unfortunately, that clearance was not forthcoming in the time frame available. However, because of the need to bring the revised NIRO in together with the other renewables obligations in the UK from 1 April, we have to lay the Order on the basis of the quarter ROC until we can get state-aid clearance.

Should EU state-aid clearance be forthcoming — and I am confident that it will be — it is my intention to lay a further Order to amend the banding

of landfill gas up to one ROC per megawatt hour at the earliest opportunity thereafter.

We are not alone in that position. Many Members will be aware that Scotland has proposed higher bands for wave and tidal power than the rest of the UK. It has also not received state-aid clearance in time and has had to lay its legislation on the basis of the GB position. I know that many Members will question why Northern Ireland is also not aiming for higher ROCs for tidal stream and wave power. We do not have the power here to issue ROCs for offshore generation. That power is exercised by the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) in Westminster, but I intend to discuss the position with DECC at the earliest opportunity.

If we are able to amend the legislation so that offshore generation is eligible for Northern Ireland ROCs, I will consider the appropriate level of support for those technologies as part of the programme of work under the offshore wind and marine renewable strategic action plan, which will be issued for consultation in the autumn.

The banding levels in the Order were based on research into the costs and market potential of each technology type, and the Order details a process for the banding levels to be periodically reviewed. That balances the need to provide investors with a stable support framework while ensuring that we can respond to market developments, so that the banding levels continue to provide the right level of incentive for project developers. That is very important.

In addition to banding, we are making a number of small technical and administrative changes to the Order. We have addressed that issue through previous amendments to the NIRO, and we are now making further improvements to the administrative requirements for microgenerators, to remove the barriers to participation in the NIRO, which some small generators face.

Technologies such as wind often get most of the coverage in these debates, but we also have the potential to generate electricity from biomass and waste. Many Members are rightly concerned about the sustainability of those fuels, and I recognise those issues. However, to ensure that the UK as a whole has a better understanding of the issue, the Order introduces a sustainability reporting requirement on all but the smallest generators who use biomass.

To protect investment decisions made on the information available at the time, we are committed to the principle of grandfathering. Subject to certain exceptions, stations in existence when the proposal to introduce banding was announced will continue to receive one ROC per megawatt hour.

I believe that the costs of administering the renewables obligation will be better met by those who

actually participate in the scheme and who will therefore benefit from the changes that we are introducing. That is the reason that a further change is being made to the NIRO, in that the costs of the administration of the scheme will be met from the buy-out fund rather than from public funds. That is a change from the current situation.

The proposed amendments to the NIRO are important for the long-term future of its operation and to the long-term future of renewable electricity in Northern Ireland.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Ms J McCann):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment considered proposals to replace The Renewables Obligation (NI) Order 2007. It noted the proposed introduction of banding, which would permit the different renewable technologies to be grouped into separate bands, with the result that different levels of support would be offered, depending on the cost of the technology that is involved.

The Committee expressed the wider concern, which was repeated in the Assembly in January 2009, that the renewables obligation certificates here and the renewable electricity feed-in tariffs in the South are not compatible. Therefore, it seems somewhat wrong to suggest that we have a single-electricity market, when the two schemes to provide incentives for generating renewable electricity result in operators on one side of the border not being able to avail themselves of incentives to provide electricity to suppliers on the other side of the border. As Committee members stated in January, the Committee will keep a close watch on that matter.

Following a briefing from departmental officials on the outcome of the consultation and consideration of the proposals on 5 February 2009, the Committee subsequently considered the draft Renewables Obligation (NI) Order 2009 on 12 March 2009. The Committee recommends that the Assembly affirm the draft Order. Go raibh maith agat

**Mr Hamilton:** I support the draft Order. It is important to do so, and I acknowledge the success of the renewables obligation in general. It has helped us to tap into our widely recognised renewable energy potential in Northern Ireland and to make progress towards achieving the target of having 12% of our energy come from renewables by 2012. The renewables obligation will also set the context for growing that potential further in the future.

The Minister and the previous Member to speak pointed out that the introduction of banding and allocating different quantities of ROCs for different types of renewable energies is the major change that

the proposals will make to the renewables obligation. There was some concern in the Committee — which I shared — about the potential of wave energy. As the Minister said, whenever we discuss renewables, we are somewhat fascinated by windmills and the potential of wind energy; however, there is great potential in Northern Ireland to produce offshore wave energy. There was concern that Scotland had sought to award more renewables obligation certificates for wave energy than would be available in Northern Ireland. However, the Assembly will be pleased to know that the European Union did not grant that derogation to Scotland, meaning that Scotland has no particular advantage over us in that respect because the ROCS that will be awarded there will remain at the same level as those that will be awarded in Northern Ireland.

I have spoken to some in the wave-energy industry who are seeking to tap into that potential. They said that they view investment in grid infrastructure as being much more important than the numbers of ROCs that they receive. Although Scotland may have equal or greater offshore wave-energy potential than we do in Northern Ireland, it tends to be located beyond the reach of the marketplace. Although that potential exists in Scotland, it is hard to get the energy that is produced to consumers quickly.

The Minister also mentioned the ongoing strategic energy framework review. I hope that in tandem with that review, the narrow proposed changes to the NIRO will strengthen and create investment in the grid and further tap into our very obvious renewable energy potential. That will ensure that Northern Ireland will not only be able to reach, but surpass the 12% target by 2012 and develop renewable forms of energy to ever greater levels in the future.

10.45 am

**Mr Neeson:** I welcome the draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has considered the Order and is very much in favour of it. In the present climate, it is important that we maximise the use of renewables. As the Minister rightly pointed out, however, we need to sort out the issue of renewables obligation certificates.

I am disappointed at the Environment Minister's attitude to wind power. Wind power is a major asset that we have in not only Northern Ireland, but in the island of Ireland, and the Republic is, in many ways, clearly forging ahead much more than Northern Ireland in the development of wind power. It is important that we maximise the potential of that energy source.

As well as maximising the use of wind power, it is important that we develop tidal and wave power. Furthermore, the use of biomass for electricity generation is an issue that needs to be developed. In

the first mandate after devolution, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment visited Denmark to explore how various materials are used to develop energy and electricity. In particular, I remember our visit to a plant in Copenhagen, which generated electricity from waste. That process is being considered by Belfast City Council, and it should be given serious consideration. Although I recognise that certain elements of the green lobby are opposed to that, it is worthy of serious consideration, and should be developed.

Furthermore, in the current economic climate, the Assembly and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) should follow the lead that has been taken by President Obama in developing the green economy, because there are opportunities for us to develop the green economy.

As the Minister is aware, the Committee has been considering the security of supply, whether of electricity or natural gas. That is why I am considering with interest the developments of the storage of natural gas. As the Minister is well aware, a location in my East Antrim constituency is being surveyed for its viability as a potential gas storage facility. I hope that there will be a successful outcome to that survey and that that security of supply for natural gas will be provided for Northern Ireland, as has happened in so many other parts of the United Kingdom.

I welcome the draft Order, and I look forward to its implementation.

**Dr Farry:** I did not, perhaps, expect to be called to speak so quickly — two Alliance Members in a row. It is disappointing that there has not been more debate on this topic in the Chamber. We are progressing what is, in effect, a piece of legislation, which will have a practical impact on society in Northern Ireland. Later this morning, we will be discussing a private Member's motion on climate change. Worthy as it is, it is still a non-binding resolution, and, no doubt, we will discuss it for an hour and a half, as we do all private Member's motions.

The motion that we are debating has practical importance, but, so far, only five Members have spoken in the debate. That is disappointing, and strange with regard to the priorities of parties in how they are approaching the matter.

Like my colleague, I welcome and support the draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009. It is important that we move forward on the basis of that Order and that we, as an Assembly, are open to a wide range of potential sources of renewable energy and do not close our minds to any of them. Although I am an environmentalist I am also a pragmatist, and I recognise that there are different opinions and options on the table.

My main concern is that although we are moving forward on the renewables obligation with respect to electricity generators, we must be aware of the wider context in which we are working and the importance of joined-up Government. There are concerns about what is happening elsewhere in Government, particularly in the planning system, in relation to renewable energy. Although today we are, quite rightly, asking more from electricity generators, there are concerns that the planning system is not keeping up to speed with respect to giving generators the tools they need in order to provide the infrastructure that will meet the new obligations that we are asking of them.

There are concerns about draft Planning Policy Statement 18, particularly the supplementary guidance arising from that in relation to the potential for the size and scope of wind turbines. There are concerns also about the areas in Northern Ireland where such turbines could potentially be located.

It is my understanding that there is sufficient interest in wind power and that there is potential for wind turbines, placed at different locations in Northern Ireland, to meet the different targets that we, as a society, are setting ourselves. However, it seems that the infrastructure for that may not be put in place because of the way in which our planning policy is going to be structured, never mind the speed of decision making in the planning system.

In essence, I make a plea for more joined-up Government in dealing with such matters. I respect the leadership that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has shown, but there is a need for better joined-up Government and better co-ordination in the Executive and between the different Departments with responsibility for renewable energy, so that Northern Ireland can have a more rounded solution and can move forward successfully.

I note that the United Kingdom is thirteenth in the European league table of wind energy capacity per capita. Given our geographical location, we have a lot of potential to move up the table. Countries such as Denmark and Spain are well ahead of us, but other countries, which may not have the same geographical advantages as us, are doing better than us on a per capita basis. That should drive us on to do a lot better. Even in the context of the UK, Northern Ireland is behind the other regions. Those facts point to the work that is required of us.

Although we can pass this Order today, it has to be seen as one part of a much wider debate. Major questions must be asked about what other parts of Government are doing, as that will enable us to meet the challenges as a whole.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I have a couple of issues to bring to her

attention that I would appreciate a response to, if possible. Renewable energy is important to us all. I will focus on wind farms, because I believe that that source of renewable energy can bring direct advantages for many people and can help the Minister and the Assembly achieve their targets.

This morning, I heard on the news that the RSPB has made a statement about wind farms. It said that it is not against them providing they are not located in environmentally sensitive areas, particularly areas that are important for bird life. Has the Minister had time to examine the statement? If so, what are her feelings in relation to it?

Some time ago, when I was wearing my other hat as a member of Ards Borough Council, comments were made to us about putting wind farms on Strangford Lough.

One of my concerns — which is fairly rich coming from a person who shoots ducks — is that if wind farms were placed strategically in Strangford Lough they could probably do more harm to the wildfowl than Jim Shannon could ever do with a 12 bore, and, for that reason, I thought that this morning's statement from the RSPB was important. I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say about that. It would appear that there could be a meeting of minds and, if that were possible, we should look at how that could be brought forward.

My final point relates to the financial incentives to farmers and landowners who are trying to diversify. Wind farms may be one way in which they can diversify, generate an income, not hurt the environment, and be sensitive to their neighbours as regards the noise from wind farms. What are the incentives for landowners, farmers — and everyone — to look after the environment?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I thank those Members who contributed to the debate. I am particularly grateful to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for its support and patience through the long process of bringing in these changes to the NIRO, and for its contribution today through the Deputy Chairperson.

The Deputy Chairperson mentioned an issue that I knew would come up — the difference between the feed-in tariff and the NIRO. Although I understand the view that she expressed on behalf of the Committee, it was not the view expressed by the majority of consultees, and it did not come out of the consultation either. I can see the logic of the Deputy Chairperson's and the Committee's argument about the single electricity market and, because of that, I said that we will keep watch on that and do all that we can to tie it up.

However, we must also be cognisant of those people who have invested in renewable energy here on the basis that a renewables obligation system is in place

and, therefore, they will take advantage from that. It would send out a negative signal to people who have made investment decisions if one were to start chopping and changing the system, and I do not want Northern Ireland to be seen as a risky place in which to invest in renewables — that is the last message that we want to send out. We need more renewable energy. I will not do anything to jeopardise that, and I know that the Committee will understand that position.

Mr Hamilton referred to the potential of renewable energy and the role of the NIRO in incentivising that, and he is absolutely right. There is potential in wave energy. That is one of the reasons why I will be discussing our territorial waters with the Department in Westminster in order to see what can be done on that issue. The 'Northern Ireland Strategic Energy Framework 2009' is a hugely important document. I hope that, when we consult on that document, people will become involved in the consultation.

Mr Neeson said that we should maximise the use of renewables. However, wind power is "not the only fruit". We recognise the importance of wind power — we did so, in particular, in the past when we started to look at renewable energy — but we must look at the wider picture. We cannot put all our eggs in one basket, and that is why the banding proposals are coming forward today. Mr Neeson talked about the landfill gas, and that is one reason why energy from waste will receive one ROC. We believe that it is important to incentivise different types of renewable energy.

I was a little disappointed by comments that were made at the Alliance Party conference at the weekend, which suggested that we were not engaged with the green economy. I dispute that wholeheartedly. The Member will know the reason for that, because part of the focus of our new interdepartmental working group on sustainable energy is on the green economy and on looking for new opportunities for green jobs. Mr Neeson mentioned gas storage and compressed air. He will know about the opportunities that are available for that in Larne Lough, and we want to develop such things.

I agree with Dr Farry that it is hugely disappointing that neither the Ulster Unionist Party nor the SDLP thought it worthwhile to speak on this important piece of legislation.

I can only conclude that they would rather propose a private Member's motion. That is a stunt, whereas this piece of legislation will make a real impact on renewable energy. It is disappointing to note that this morning,

11.00 am

In relation to draft Planning Policy Statement 18, the draft supplementary planning guidance raised a number of concerns about some elements of the wind-farm industry. My Department is proactively working with the Department of the Environment, and

Mr Farry knows that it is a balancing act between protecting very beautiful rural landscapes and giving impetus to renewable energies. When the SPG is produced, I hope that it will be a balanced document that will take into account everything that we have said about renewable energies and wind farms.

**Dr Farry:** I am certainly encouraged by the Minister's comments. Does she agree that wind farms could, in some cases, enhance the landscape of Northern Ireland in that people would see them as a sign of progress and engagement with the environment?

The landscape is never a constant: it is always evolving. Although there are some very sensitive areas of Northern Ireland, a wind farm on a hilltop — in other areas — could be seen as a source of pride.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** If the Member had listened to the Member who spoke after him, he would appreciate the difficulties with which we must deal because wind farms are a subjective issue. I did not think that I would ever hear Mr Shannon wanting to protect the birds of Strangford. *[Laughter.]* He wanted to ensure that Strangford Lough — which is an environmentally sensitive area — was protected. It is important that the draft supplementary planning guidance achieves the right balance, which is why we have engaged with the Department of the Environment. When the final document is published, I have every reason to be confident that it will deal with some of the objections that have been made thus far.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that the Order will contribute to the further development of the renewables sector in Northern Ireland. It will also support the higher levels of renewable electricity that are needed to reduce carbon emissions and — importantly — to secure our energy supply. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That the Draft Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General

#### **The Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Gardiner):** I beg to move

That this Assembly determines that the salary to be paid, under Article 4(1) of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, to the holder of the office of Comptroller and Auditor General from 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010, shall be the amount recommended by the Review Body on Senior Salaries as payable for that year to the judiciary at salary group 5.

First, I apologise for the absence of the Chairperson of the Audit Committee. Unfortunately, he had another engagement that clashed with this morning's debate. He sends his apologies.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee, I introduce the motion that is tabled in the Chairperson's name on behalf of the Committee. The governing legislation for the Comptroller and Auditor General's salary is the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, which allows for the salary to be fixed by resolution of the Assembly. The annual salary increase is payable on 1 April 2009. Therefore, a resolution must be agreed by the Assembly on or before that date.

In 2008, the Assembly agreed that Standing Order 58 should provide a mechanism to update the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General annually. Accordingly, it falls to the Audit Committee to review how the salary will be determined and to propose a motion to the Assembly that recommends what it deems to be a reasonable increase for the year.

The motion proposes that the Assembly should resolve to pay the Comptroller and Auditor General a salary for 2009-2010 that is in line with the Senior Salaries Review Body's recommendations for the judicial group 5 rate. The Senior Salaries Review Body is an independent body, and its report is currently being scrutinised at Westminster.

During suspension, it was agreed by the Audit Committee, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Comptroller and Auditor General that the salary should be linked to the judicial group 5 rate. That decision has been endorsed by the Committee in successive years after consideration of the following factors: section 65(6) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides that the Assembly cannot reduce the salary payable to the Comptroller and Auditor General; in addition, the salary must be less than the highest salary paid to a public servant in Northern Ireland.

The Committee reviewed those parameters and the increases recommended by the Senior Salaries Review Body in previous years. The Committee concluded that the judicial group 5 rate was a reasonable benchmark for the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Senior Salaries Review Body report on judicial salaries for 2009-2010 has not yet been published. Therefore, the motion provides that the salary increase should be paid retrospectively to 1 April 2009 once the recommendation is published. The report will be placed in the Assembly Library as soon as it becomes available. The Audit Committee has undertaken to review this arrangement when the current Comptroller and Auditor General retires later this year.

In agreeing this motion, Members will be maintaining an agreement that the Audit Committee has fully scrutinised and with which its members are unanimously content.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly determines that the salary to be paid, under Article 4(1) of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, to the holder of the office of Comptroller and Auditor General from 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010, shall be the amount recommended by the Review Body on Senior Salaries as payable for that year to the judiciary at salary group 5.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Act on CO2 Advertising Campaign

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on the Act on CO2 advertising campaign. A valid petition of concern in respect of that motion was presented earlier today. Having checked the petition, the Speaker regarded it as fulfilling the requirements of Standing Order 28. However, the presentation of that petition means that the vote on the motion may not be held at the conclusion of today's debate. At its lunchtime meeting today, the Business Committee will consider when the vote on the motion will be taken.

Members should also note that the vote on the motion will be taken on a cross-community basis. However, the petition does not affect the amendment, and the vote on the amendment may proceed today. Members who wish to inspect the petition of concern may do so at the Business Office.

Members may, of course, contribute to the debate itself. 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 McClarty:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the attempt by the Minister of the Environment to block the Department of Energy and Climate Change advertising campaign Act on CO2; further notes that the position is contrary to the targets set out in the Programme for Government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to remove his opposition to the Act on CO2 advertising campaign.

The following are not my words, but the words of Senator John McCain, the most recent Republican candidate for the American presidency:

"I know that climate change is real. We can have a debate about how serious it is, but the debate about climate change is over."

It can be said that the Republican Party has, for some time, maintained a healthy scepticism about man-made climate change. However, in light of the growing weight of scientific evidence, its members now realise that to deny climate change, sit on their hands and do nothing is logically and morally wrong.

Our Environment Minister has tried to paint a picture that anyone who proclaims that climate change is real, man-made and a threat is a confused ideologue intent on destroying our economy. It is patent nonsense to adopt such a position: the Minister of the Environment is single-handedly isolating Northern Ireland on this key issue, and he is making us all look like dangerous radicals.

That view is shared by many people including Neil Adger, an expert on climate-change adaptation from Northern Ireland who is now based at the University of East Anglia's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. He has stated that the basis science is so clear and unambiguous that anyone denying it is either a fool or is deliberately misleading others for political or other ends. That opinion is backed up by David King, the UK Government's former chief scientific adviser, and Gabrielle Walker, who have stated that people who question the evidence:

"either have a vested interest in ignoring the scientific arguments or they are fools."

Those people are not ideologues, and they are not left-wing radicals. They are scientists and commentators who have based their opinions on the available evidence and facts. Most of all, they are pragmatists who recognise the long-term danger that climate change poses for the United Kingdom's economy and security; they are pragmatists who recognise the long-term human cost of doing nothing, and they are pragmatists who realise that people in the developing world will pay the heaviest price for the ostrich impersonations of people such as Mr Wilson.

I am beginning to wonder why we should expect anything more from a DUP Minister. We are becoming increasingly aware that that party has no vision for the future as it repeatedly exalts and practises economic and fiscal short-termism. Indeed, the DUP has more in common with the Scottish Nationalist Party than with genuine unionists, and it appears to think that it is either above, or immune to, scientific and public opinion.

Minister Wilson's opposition to the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change's (DECC) advertising campaign is perhaps the most ludicrous and dangerous development in his radicalism. The advertisements urge people and businesses to reduce energy consumption and cut carbon emissions. That seems to be the most positive and beneficial of messages that any Government could produce. Indeed, it is directly in line with the Executive's targets and the message they delivered to the public. In their Programme for Government, the Northern Ireland Executive state:

"It is clear that climate change is one of the most serious problems facing the world. While we recognise that it requires action internationally, we are determined to play our part in addressing this challenge by reducing our impact on climate change ... our carbon footprint is relatively high and well beyond a level that is sustainable in the longer-term."

It appears that no one told Sammy.

There are also targets to reduce greenhouse gas 25% below 1990 levels by 2025. Minister Wilson blatantly contradicted the Executive's policies on climate change in a letter to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. That raises serious issues about ministerial collective responsibility and the ministerial

code. In the system of government that we work under, does the Minister have the right to act as he did?

The Act on CO2 adverts have the objective and potential to reduce our carbon emissions and save families and businesses money, but Mr Wilson called them an “insidious propaganda campaign”. His party colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, gives money to the Carbon Trust in order to increase businesses’ energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions — does the Minister of the Environment consider that to be an insidious waste of resources? What does he think of the £18 million that such initiatives saved local businesses in Northern Ireland last year?

11.15 am

Minister Wilson has been quoted as saying:

“As the world recession bites, countries are looking at what is practical in terms of keeping their economies going, as opposed to what the environmentalists might like.”

The Minister has badly misjudged the international community, the business community and the UK Government. The CBI recently criticised the UK Government for not doing enough to lead the way in low-carbon technologies. It stated:

“With increasing globalisation, the UK has an opportunity to enter and lead in new markets estimated at \$1 trillion.”

It went on to state:

“The UK needs to act now if it is to be a low-carbon leader.”

The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, announced that he expects that the green economy will create 400,000 new jobs in the next eight years, and Barack Obama has pledged billions of dollars to ensure that green energy forms part of America’s economic resurgence. Left to Minister Wilson, Northern Ireland will be absent when opportunities arise.

Mr Wilson and his DUP colleagues have been naysayers, scaremongers, critics and Back-Benchers all their political lives. Mr Wilson has not yet realised that he is a Minister with responsibilities, an expectant public and a Department. London and Brussels are setting high environmental standards which, regardless of whether the Minister agrees with them, we must implement. His antiquated position on climate change makes the work of his Department and officials extremely difficult and, I am sure, embarrassing at times. However, he has already shown through his criticism of the Planning Service that he is not scared to transfer his own failings onto his staff.

Minister Wilson, writing — on behalf of us all — to Ed Miliband, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, said that the advertising campaign promotes anthropogenic climate-change gospel, which is contrary to his views as Minister of the Environment in Northern Ireland. He went on to say that he does not

believe that man-made greenhouse-gas emissions are the main cause of climate change, and that he does not believe that the Act on CO2 messaging should appear in Northern Ireland. He also went on to say that language should be tempered where possible to take into account local difference in opinion.

The only differences of opinion in this place are between the Minister and his own party manifesto; the Minister and the Programme for Government; the Minister and this Assembly; and the Minister and the public at large. The Minister should withdraw his opposition to the advertising campaign which would help us meet our agreed and binding targets and also help families and businesses alike to save money. The Minister’s opposition highlights the worst form of blinkered Northern Ireland nationalism and the worst type of arrogance possible. Despite the overwhelming evidence, he believes that everyone else is wrong and that he is right.

Richard Girling, writing in ‘The Times’, correctly highlighted:

“Those on Planet Exxon are beyond the pull of reason.”

I support the motion.

**Mr Gallagher:** I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and, mindful of the Environment Committee’s vote of no confidence in the Minister of the Environment, calls on the Executive to launch a cross-departmental advertising campaign on climate change aimed at achieving the Programme for Government environmental protection targets.”

There are two main points to the amendment. First, there is the matter of the vote of no confidence in the Minister that was passed at the Environment Committee and, secondly, the need for a cross-departmental approach to the issue of climate change.

When the vote of no confidence was passed, the Minister’s colleagues rushed quickly out of the meeting to tell the media that —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Gallagher:** I will not. Mr Weir was among those Members who rushed out to tell the media that this was —

**Mr Weir:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As I am sure the media will confirm, any discussions that I had or interview that I gave took place after the meeting was over. Is it in order for the Member to deliberately mislead the House?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** That is not a point of order. The Member should resume his seat.

**Mr T Clarke:** On a point of order. The question is — *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, are you going to rule on a Member shouting from a sedentary

position? The question is this: is it in order for the Member to deliberately mislead the House?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member is not misleading the House. There is no evidence to say one way or the other; it is a point of view.

**Mr Gallagher:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The DUP spokespersons tried to dismiss that vote of no confidence as a political game or stunt. To refresh everybody's minds, I will read from the Programme for Government:

"We are becoming increasingly aware of both the global and local threats to our natural and built environments. It is clear that climate change is one of the most serious problems facing the world. While we recognise that it requires action internationally, we are determined to play our part in addressing this challenge."

One of the ways in which we can do that is by reducing our impact on climate change.

"We have the lowest levels on these islands of electricity generated from renewable sources and our carbon footprint is relatively high and well beyond a level that is sustainable in the longer-term. At a local level, therefore, action is needed to protect our built heritage, our landscape and marine environment and to reduce our impact on climate change."

That was one of the reasons behind the vote of no confidence in the Minister.

Climate change resulting from greenhouse gas emissions is now a universally accepted reality. The signs are all around us — warmer temperatures; extreme weather, and we know all too well about melting glaciers and the impact that that has on animal and plant life cycles. In the face of overwhelming evidence about that link, our Environment Minister has, on so many occasions, rejected the fact that climate change has been man-made. He has allied himself with the sceptics and made himself and his Department appear silly and irrelevant at times. It is a stance that has alarmed many people who realise that there is a serious problem and has alarmed all of the people who care passionately about the environment and the consequences of climate change — consequences which they see as catastrophic.

The sceptics argue that the earth's climate has always changed and that it is no different now. That is true; however, it is not an argument against the change that we are experiencing and that is a direct result of the actions of humans and the resulting carbon emissions. The climate does not change spontaneously. There has always been some driver behind the change. For example, the ice age came to an end because the sun moved closer to the earth. There is nothing like that to explain — *[Interruption.]* There are no natural drivers behind the change in climate. For the benefit of the Minister, I will state, once again, that there are no natural drivers powerful enough to produce the level of warming that we have experienced. I refer to a lead author from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change, who is also a professor at the University of East Anglia. He said:

"Anyone who disputes these facts is either a fool or seeking deliberately to mislead for political or other purposes."

Our neighbouring Governments in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have joined with most of the industrial countries across the world to tackle climate change. They are making efforts to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and to cut back on carbon emissions. Their Government spokespersons are putting out messages such as that all of us have to change our habits and reduce our carbon footprint if we are to save the environment. Their environment Ministers, in particular, are reinforcing those messages.

As elected representatives, we have a responsibility. How can we ask householders to cutback and to become more energy efficient if we do not send out a strong message? How can we expect the big companies to fall into line and to comply with their requirements? It is time for a serious approach across all Departments, not just the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In a previous debate, I voiced the concerns of the Chief Medical Officer. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development also has a huge responsibility for forests and trees and the role that they can play in mitigating the impact of climate change.

I wish to consider the economic advantages of tackling climate change and reducing emissions. Recently, a study on that topic was carried out by Queen's University, which stated:

"As the UK economy moves towards a low carbon economy, Greenhouse Gas performance and efficiencies will become increasingly important to regional competitiveness."

The study looked at the competitiveness of the four countries of the UK and found that the English economy was the most efficient and, therefore, the most economically competitive. That link has been well established. Scotland was the next most efficient, followed by Northern Ireland, so we have room for improvement. The economic downturn presents an opportunity, and other Governments have already availed themselves of that opportunity. The potential of renewables from wind sources, the sun and crops such as biomass is untapped.

The "green new deal" that was announced by the President of the United States brings an opportunity to put people back to work, as has already been mentioned by the proposer of the motion. In recent months, our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland launched a scheme to make homes across the entire country more energy efficient and created 200,000 jobs as part of that initiative at a time when job losses are at such a serious level.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Gallagher:** I am not giving way.

The conclusions of the Queen's University study are worth further consideration. The study states:

"those regions that will be most competitive will be those that are able to outperform other regions, in terms of a higher production of goods and services per unit of GHG impacts."

It also states:

"In the not-so-distant future, the efficiency with which GHG emissions are used will be a fundamentally important determinant of competitiveness. Countries and regions with low GHG efficiencies may therefore find themselves at a disadvantage."

Therefore, it is important for the Assembly to adopt the motion as amended as a first step. I thank the House for its consideration, and I ask Members to support the motion as amended.

**Mr Weir:** I have the difficult job of following the expert dissertation in astrophysics from the Member who just spoke. I am sure that, if they were alive today, Galileo and Copernicus would be green with envy at his grasp of the subject. I will make my remarks fairly quickly — not only because I have only five minutes, but because I want to avoid the dangers of a moving sun hitting me. *[Laughter.]*

I am disappointed by the motion, but, given its source, I am not particularly surprised. That is the level of "stuntery" that one would expect from the Members who proposed it.

The motion is not about the commitment of the Executive to carbon reduction and to combating climate change, because that is clear and unchanged. The commitments and actions that are taken by various Departments are clear-cut. Under my colleague Arlene Foster, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has a group on sustainable energy. Work is going on between all Departments, including the Department of the Environment (DOE), to bring those commitments about. There is an issue over whether all Departments are fully pulling their weight, but it is clear that the motion is not about that.

11.30 am

Nor, indeed, is the issue about trying to ban any advert. Had the mover and co-signatory of the motion actually listened to what the Minister said to the Committee, they would know that he stated clearly that not only had he not banned the ad, he had not tried to ban it. The motion is, therefore, not factually accurate on that basis.

Nor, indeed, is the motion about preserving energy or about trying to prevent people knowing about energy efficiency. We already have the Energy Saving Trust's adverts, which run alongside others.

I believe that the motion is motivated by the same stuntery that we saw in the Committee when the motion of no confidence was proposed. Indeed, its

motivation comes from an ever-more-desperate Conservative grouping that sits on other Benches. That group is more concerned about vote reduction than about carbon reduction. It is less concerned about landslides in the developing world than the landslide in East Antrim in 2005. That is the real motivation behind the motion: it is a blatant attempt at point-scoring. I will give it credit, however, for giving the Assembly the opportunity to debate the issue that is truly behind the matter, which is the right of the Assembly and the Executive to pursue campaigns on their own accord.

The fact is that the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

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

**Mr Weir:** Had Members — particularly those who sit on the Committee — actually listened to the Minister instead of wanting constantly to talk, they would have realised that he sought a Northern Ireland campaign on the issue. He objected to only one item in the advert and to the attempt by the Westminster Department concerned to impose it on other parts of the United Kingdom. Wales and Scotland objected in exactly the same way; indeed, they are pursuing their own campaigns.

On that issue — as well as on other devolved matters, such as road safety — the Assembly is entitled to pursue its own campaign. Road-safety campaigns do not happen simply by accident: they are tried and tested, and indeed, market tested, in order to determine the most effective message for Northern Ireland. The fact is that there has been no opportunity to do so with regard to climate change. Act on CO2 is simply an attempt to impose a one-size-fits-all approach throughout the UK. It was resisted by Wales and Scotland, and indeed, no similar campaign has been put in place in the Republic of Ireland.

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** I appreciate that the Member has given way. He will be pleased to note that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has now started to swing round to my point of view. Such has been the opposition in England to the Act on CO2 brand that the ad now has to include the strapline that includes the words "save energy". That is my point: if a message is to be effective, it must resonate with the public.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr Weir:** I agree absolutely with the Minister. As he made clear at the Committee meeting in question, and as Members should know perfectly well, there has never been any opposition to saving energy, nor has there ever been any opposition to the Assembly putting forward its own message on the issue. As a devolved Assembly, it should have the opportunity to do that. It is clear that the motion is simply an attempt at stuntery.

It has unearthed, however, one important issue, which is the right of the Assembly to follow its own advertising campaigns.

I must say that I am surprised that on the one hand, the SDLP and, presumably, Sinn Féin will support the motion and will, therefore, want the Assembly to follow slavishly the exact line that has been taken in England, while on the other, the Conservatives' friends, UCUNF (Ulster Conservatives and Unionists — New Force), on the Benches to my right, want the Assembly to follow the exact words of new Labour.

There is, therefore, no conviction whatever in either stance. The dodgy science that was highlighted by the proposer of the amendment, as well as his dodgy recollection of what happened in the Committee on the particular day in question, shows that there is absolutely no conviction behind the motion. It is simply an attempt to score points and to have a go at the Minister of the Environment. I call on the Assembly to, rightly, reject that stunter and to concentrate on taking real and substantial action on energy conservation and to ensure that climate change is tackled properly.

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

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion and the amendment. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I also welcome the Minister to the Big Brother House; this must be day 133. I am sure that he is wondering whether he will be evicted.  
[Laughter.]

When one reads the text of the advertisements that the Minister of the Environment blocked from being aired in the North —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Boylan:** I have only two and a half minutes to speak, Peter; have a wee seat to yourself there. Sorry.

When one reads the text of the advertisements that the Minister of the Environment blocked from being aired in the North, one can see that their major message is very relevant in the present economic downturn — namely, save money, save energy. The Minister's reasoning for blocking them was his self-proclaimed scepticism about the effects of global warming and climate change, and mankind's contribution to it. However, we can clearly see that those advertisements make little mention of the subject, other than to outline that reducing energy reduces CO2 emissions, and a suggestion that the viewer or listener searches online for information on Act on CO2 literature.

Therefore, the Minister's unreasonable rationale for blocking those advertisements is bogus. The Minister is perfectly entitled to his personal views on global warming and climate change, but the public perception

is that the Minister's personal view is contrary to that of his Ministry. It should not be even a matter for debate whether the Minister can order his Department to hold his views — he cannot. The Minister must be aware that with his title comes responsibility and leadership — responsibility to listen to the voices of the vast majority of people in the North, in Europe and, indeed, the world.

Global warming is a major concern for the planet. People want to do something — no matter how small — to try to counteract it. The Minister should not discourage such actions simply because he does not believe that small actions make any difference. His job is to encourage and to inform. However, by blocking those advertisements, he has done none of the aforementioned, and, instead, has brought derision and ridicule on his Department and on the Assembly.

If he is not prepared to carry out his role responsibly, I must support the call for the Executive to launch a cross-departmental campaign to address climate change and relieve the Minister of the burden that he so obviously has no wish to carry.

The Executive must be prepared to listen to, and I quote Joan Ruddock:

“the best science, the most up-to-date information and the evidence”

in order to ensure that we meet the targets that are set out in the Programme for Government. Either that, or else if the DUP Ministers on the Executive rally round their sceptical colleague and refuse to play their part, we can assume that the line from ‘The Sunday Times’ on 15 February — and I have learned the tactic of using the Sunday newspapers as a source of reference from the DUP — would seem to be a claim well-founded when it stated:

“Power has gone to their heads, and some senior DUP members, including Wilson seem to be revelling in their new-found notoriety.”

I apologise to Peter Weir; I spoke for three minutes and 15 seconds. I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Ford:** My colleagues and I will support the motion as amended because of the words that appear on the Order Paper, not because of any oratory powers or scientific persuasion from the Members who proposed the motion or those who tabled the amendment.

It seems to me, as Stephen Farry made the point during a debate this morning, that there is something rather ridiculous in the fact that Members who had nothing to say during the debate on the draft Renewables Obligation Order can devote time to this sort of private Member's motion.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Ford:** This place's name is supposed to refer to its status as a legislative Assembly, not as a debating

society. It is sad that more Members are in the House at this stage to take part in a debating society than were present when serious legislation was being discussed by a Minister from the DUP Benches who seems to have a greater understanding of the issues than her successor as the Minister of the Environment.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I thank the Member for giving way. Mr McClarty talked about the importance of renewable energy to the economy, and so on. However, when the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was in the Chamber, Mr McClarty — and I think he was present — did not have a word to say about the matter. Perhaps no one had written a script for him on that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Ford:** I would not want to be too embarrassed by agreeing too much with the Minister, so I will leave that issue hanging.

It seems that the Minister's performance during his time in office has amounted to a continual statement that he does what he is obliged to do. Indeed, he probably does. I do not believe that he could ever be got under the ministerial code for not doing what he is obliged to do.

The problem is that a Minister who does the minimum that he is obliged to do, and then speaks against the spirit of the Programme for Government's undertakings to reduce CO2 emissions, does not seem to be providing the leadership that we are entitled to. That is my major concern with the way in which he is carrying out his actions.

As Senator Pat Moynihan might have said, Sammy Wilson is entitled to his opinions but he is not entitled to his own facts. The facts, as understood by the overwhelming majority of opinion, are quite clear. I hope that when the Minister responds to the debate he will remember to give me the figure that he could not provide in the Environment Committee — it was how much CO2 I have saved by using my Translink SmartPass throughout this year, compared to the emissions that I might have caused had I been using a car.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I am sure that the Member is dying to hear what his carbon footprint is. According to the number of miles for which the Member claimed travel expenses last year, he generated 1.4 tons of carbon. That is considerably less than other Committee members; however, had he used his SmartPass continuously, he could have reduced that amount by 75% to 0.36 tons. He still has a long way to go.

**Mr Ford:** I note that the Minister is not capable of answering the question that I asked him, which was how much I had saved, but he got his cheap jag in anyway.

The issue was raised about whether DECC was attempting to impose its particular set of English advertisements on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Minister told us that the Scots, and now the Welsh, have rejected the DECC advertisements and are doing their own thing. However, that is the fundamental difference between the Scots, the Welsh, and this Minister — as yet we have seen no advertising campaign from the DOE on the matter.

It may well be that simply concentrating on switching off the standby button was not of a high enough standard for Sammy Wilson to allow his Department to approve the advertisement. The question then is this: if he is going to maintain that argument, what advertisements will we see? That is why it is vital that we see real action across the entire Executive, and not just on an advertising campaign. Climate change is a cross-departmental issue, yet it seems to be going unrecognised.

If we are going to deal seriously with climate change, it must be looked at by the entire Executive. Different Departments have responsibilities, whether it is for energy efficiency, renewable energy — as we discussed earlier — the warm homes scheme, or for greater incentives to use public transport. All those are vital necessities, and they require action across the entire range of Executive Departments. This does not merely involve the question of whether a particular form of advertisement is shown.

Earlier this morning, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, when debating the draft Renewables Obligations Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, sought to defend the approach of the Executive and spoke about various things that were happening on a cross-departmental basis. However, it seems to me that those actions are extremely thin on the ground. There may be discussions among Ministers and small groups of officials, but virtually nothing is being rolled out — at a time when initiatives on the green economy are being flagged up by President Obama in particular, and when action is taking place in other parts of the UK and in other countries in Europe. There is nothing to show that there is real, consistent, coherent action taking place here.

We have heard about the difficulties in getting renewable energy from wind power under way under PPS 18. There is a range of things not being carried through across the entire range of Executive responsibilities. If the Minister is going to tell us that he is refusing to have the actions of the DECC imposed on him, but that he is doing better himself, it seems to me that he and his colleagues have a great deal of explaining to do.

**Mr Ross:** I agree with Mr Boylan on one point: environmental issues have been a hot topic in the

Chamber since the current Environment Minister took up his post. We have seen a positive debate resulting, both in the Chamber and among the public, about how we should address climate change, the causes of climate change, how the Government should implement policy, and how we should affect our individual lifestyles. We should all thank the Minister for ensuring that we have that debate.

It is unfortunate that some people over the past number of weeks, and in the Chamber today, have chosen to say that the Minister has banned the advertisement from our TV screens.

The Minister has not banned the advertisement; indeed, I saw it last night while I was reading up for this debate. He has exercised his constitutional right to decide on how to promote devolved matters. That is fundamental to the meaning of devolution. It means that on devolved issues such as the environment and climate change, Northern Ireland Ministers must be able to decide for themselves how to promote Government policy. The Minister's decision is an important constitutional marker; those in the Chamber who lambasted various direct rule Ministers over the years should be glad that local Ministers are now able to call the shots.

11.45 am

The Act on CO2 campaign did not seek the views of the Northern Ireland Executive, or, indeed, the people of Northern Ireland. It is, in effect, an England-only strategy. For those who repeatedly, and often quite rightly, say that we cannot simply transplant GB legislation or strategies into Northern Ireland, this is a clear example of just that. I would like to think that, if the Executive are to promote any message, they would carry out their own research and opinion polling in Northern Ireland rather than rely on data from elsewhere. Indeed, as Mr Weir said, the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales chose not to run with the Act on CO2 advertisements. The Scottish version did not carry the Act on CO2 logo, because it, along with the advertisement's strapline, is an England-only logo.

We have talked about the Department for Social Development's energy-saving message, through which I am aware that the power to save energy is at my fingertips. That Department does not use the Act on CO2 logo; perhaps the SDLP Members should talk to their Minister about that issue if they feel strongly about it.

The role of the Executive is important; the motion and the amendment ignore the fact that the Executive are collectively responsible for promoting the Programme for Government targets on emissions. The Minister of the Environment's decision not to use the Act on CO2 advertisements does not mean that the core message will not be heard. For example, DSD promotes household

energy efficiency in conjunction with the Energy Saving Trust, and its advertisements appear on our television screens all the time. The Department for Regional Development has a role in encouraging more of us to leave our cars at home and use public transport. Mr Weir mentioned the role of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the sustainable energy group that was set up by Arlene Foster.

The decision not to use the Act on CO2 strategy does not mean that we will miss our targets. It would be naive to promote that argument, because to do so is to say that one advertisement alone will make a difference. Such an argument makes assumptions about the views of the Northern Ireland public and what it will or will not buy into. Without any local research being done, that is a poor state of affairs.

The recent debate over here on climate change has demonstrated that the general public have diverse views on the issue. Mr Boylan mentioned the Big Brother house; the numbers of people who have contacted the Minister in the constituency office that I share with him in Larne, and in his ministerial office, demonstrate that the vast majority of the public support his views and support the fact that we are having a real debate on the issues.

I wish to return to a point that was made by Mr Ford and by the Minister. Tommy Gallagher and David McClarty talked about the importance of renewables, but it was significant that no one from their parties spoke in the preceding debate on the motion proposed by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. That is telling, and it shows us the real motivation of those two parties in this debate. The Assembly's time would be better spent on promoting the message of energy conservation and on real environmentalism, rather than trying to score cheap political points. For those reasons, I oppose the motion and the amendment.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to speak in favour of the motion and the amendment. It is quite clear that the Committee for the Environment has no confidence in the Minister; nor do the environmental lobby, university students in Belfast or many of his party colleagues have any confidence. However, an eccentric children's TV presenter who has not been seen for 20 years supports the Minister, as well as one or two people in Larne, by the sound of it.

The Programme for Government clearly states that action is needed to reduce our impact on climate change. The DUP signed up to that and to tackling the impact that human activity has on climate change. Why, then, did the DUP appoint someone —

**Mr T Clarke:** The Member is insinuating that the DUP has signed up to all of that, as if Sinn Féin is some sort of wonderful party. I omitted to write to the

Minister about a matter that he raised during a meeting of the Committee for the Environment in the Senate Chamber in connection with a person who had been involved in environmental crime. The Member had written to the Minister to try to get that person cleared of that environmental crime.

Therefore, I am curious to know how Mr McKay can stand here today and claim to be the panacea for everything to do with environmental issues, and yet, in another instance, he wrote to the Minister to try to assist someone who caused an environmental crime to get off.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr McKay:** I thank the Member for his contribution. I ask him to recheck his facts and, indeed, to reread the letter, if he has actually seen it. In that letter, I clearly state that the environmental laws need to be upheld. However, I oppose the way in which the procedures were carried out and the fact that they were not carried out quickly enough in that instance. The Member should check his facts.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McKay:** I will not give way again.

Why did the DUP appoint to that Ministry someone who consistently makes a mockery of the party? Sammy says that the rest of the DUP is wrong, because the party's manifesto says that it believes that human activity influences climate change. Not only is he giving a two-finger salute to the environmental lobby, he is giving the two-finger salute to his own party. Where is the party's Whip in all of this? When is he going to take account of public opinion and evict Sammy from the DUP Front Bench?

The Executive are committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25% on 1990 levels by the year 2025. Greenhouse gas emissions have already decreased by 6%, which is welcome. However, much more needs to be done.

I also support the amendment. The issue of climate change needs to be mainstreamed across different Departments, in particular the Department for Social Development and the Department for Regional Development, because they, too, have responsibilities. As Tommy Gallagher outlined, there are many opportunities for job creation, particularly in the field of renewable energy. The Executive should look at that issue in a more joined-up way. It is imperative, therefore, that we act on CO2 emissions, that Ministers adhere to the Programme for Government and that they address the issue of climate change on a cross-departmental basis.

Today, at 12.30 pm, the Assembly all-party working group on climate change will meet a representative of

the Met Office who will outline the dangers that weather-pattern changes pose to this society and others. The Minister is welcome to join us, if he wants to learn something.

**Mr I McCrea:** I am sure that it will not be a shock to the proposers of the motion or the amendment that I do not support either of them. As some of my colleagues have said, this is nothing more than political "stuntery". I do not believe that —

**Mr McClarty:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr I McCrea:** If the Member holds on, I will give way in a minute; I have only just started. As my colleague pointed out, Mr McClarty has already had 10 minutes to speak, and much of his contribution was not on the issue.

The Minister was right not to support the advertisement. The Assembly and the Executive, as a whole, have a responsibility to deal with the issue of climate change. As other Members said, the Minister for Social Development has a responsibility to tackle the issue and is doing so. The Minister of the Environment made the right decision to use his discretion not to fund the advert.

However, I accept that climate change is a reality; it has been a feature of the history, dating back hundreds of years, of our planet. Perhaps climate change is not a phenomenon, as others might suggest. Some scientists believe that there was an ice age; so what happened to the ice if climate change did not cause it to melt? Low and behold, we are now told that climate change may be the result of industrialisation, cars, aeroplanes and other types of energy use. If that were the case, what brought about climate change before the industrial revolution? The Minister's views are clear —

**Mr McKay:** I find the Member's comments quite strange, because his father was a consistent supporter of the passage of the Climate Change Act 2008 at Westminster. Does the Member agree with the Environment Minister's opinion that human activity does not contribute to climate change, despite the fact that DUP party policy clearly states that human activity does contribute to climate change?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr T Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr I McCrea:** I will respond first and then I will give way.

I have no difficulty in supporting the view of my party, and I believe that the Minister has been right to open up the debate. Scientists are now disagreeing with one another on the issue, so no one should be concerned about having different opinions. The

Minister has opened up the debate, and people should have a right to express their opinion.

**Mr McClarty:** At the beginning of his speech, the Member mentioned that the motion was nothing but “political stuntery” — his words, not mine. If the motion is “political stuntery”, why did his party think it necessary to table a petition of concern?

**Mr I McCrea:** The fact that I said the motion was political stuntery should be evidence enough. The Minister’s views about the human impact on climate change are clear.

**Mr T Clarke:** The Member mentioned the human impact, and David McKay talked about human activity. Does the Member agree that Mr McKay’s human activity, as a member of the Environment Committee, has not contributed much because he has the worst attendance rate of all members on that Committee?

**Mr I McCrea:** The one benefit of Mr McKay’s non-attendance is that his carbon footprint is not as bad as that of some other Committee members. *[Interruption.]* I did not say it was the only benefit. The Minister has been right to express —

**Mr McKay:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr I McCrea:** I have given way enough — I need to finish off.

The Minister has been right to have the courage to express his views on the matter — the fact that scientists are now starting to change their minds is evidence of that.

Let us look at some of the wider aspects of the issue. The Ulster Unionist Party says that it is worried about climate change, but one aspect of that concerns methane. As everyone knows, most methane comes from farm animals. I take it that the Ulster Unionist Party, and those who support the motion, support farmers being made redundant and animals being taken off farms so that methane is no longer an issue.

As far as I am concerned, the motion is political stuntery and I hope that the House comes to its senses and opposes it.

**Mr McCallister:** The way that the debate has gone has been surprising. *[Interruption.]* Thank you. The Minister would probably be better going back to teaching than being Minister of the Environment.

It is bizarre that DUP Members have referred to the motion as political stuntery when their party has tabled a petition of concern. Mr Ian McCrea’s rebuttal of that assertion was less than convincing. DUP Members have used the words “political stuntery” throughout the debate, but the fact that they stand by the petition of concern that their party tabled is in itself a political stunt.

The Ulster Unionist Party is very supportive of cross-cutting Government measures, and we accept that many parts of Government need to be involved in the climate-change debate. However, the lead on the issue should come from the Department of the Environment and be headed by the Minister.

**Mr T Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McCallister:** Well, why not?

**Mr T Clarke:** The Member said that the lead should come from the Department of the Environment. Is that why his party took one of its Members — who used to drive a three-litre, six-cylinder Jaguar — off the Environment Committee?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

12.00 noon

**Mr McCallister:** I am glad that the Member has such details on what we all drive. I assume that he is talking about Mr Gardiner. Mr Gardiner was moved to the Health Committee; that was simply as a result of parties changing Committee memberships. It is no big deal. The DUP moved Alistair Ross to the Committee for Regional Development. Lots of Committee members move — what is the issue there?

The Act on CO2 campaign provided an excellent opportunity for individuals, families, businesses and the Executive to reduce Northern Ireland’s carbon emissions and to save money. The Department of Energy and Climate Change was willing to pay for the campaign. Essentially, the Minister of the Environment turned down, on Northern Ireland’s behalf, a free opportunity to help us to reach targets that are set out in the Programme for Government, and to save money. That is a disgrace.

To quote one of Mr Wilson’s statements:

“I think in 20 years’ time we will look back at this whole climate change debate and ask ourselves how on earth we were ever conned into spending the billions of pounds which are going into this without any kind of rigorous examination of the background, the science, the implications of it all.”

If Mr Wilson is speaking on behalf of Northern Ireland, as Minister of the Environment, it is prudent to examine the evidence on which he bases his opinions and his own “rigorous examination” of the evidence.

Mr Wilson has, on occasion, referred to, and it now appears that he has based his opinions on, a report of 500 scientists that documents doubts about man-made global warming. What Minister Wilson was more reluctant to tell us was that that report was authored by Joseph Bast and James M Taylor of the Heartland Institute in America.

First, I should point out that Joseph Bast is an economist, and James Taylor is a lawyer: neither of

them is a scientist. Secondly, it should be noted that the Heartland Institute is funded by Exxon Mobil, one of the world's leading oil companies.

Professor James McCarthy, of Harvard University, in his evidence to the US Congress, stated of Exxon-funded ideological advocacy groups, of which the Heartland Institute is one:

"These groups promote spokespeople who misrepresent peer-reviewed scientific findings or cherry-pick facts in an attempt to mislead the media and public into thinking there is vigorous debate in the mainstream scientific community about climate change."

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McCallister:** Well, briefly: I do not have much time.

**Mr Poots:** Given that the Member is so convinced of climate change, and his acceptance that cows, for example, are one of the highest producers of methane, will he give an assurance to the Assembly today that he is going to dispose of all his cows and plant trees on his farm?

**Mr McCallister:** When I started to speak, I wanted to take on some of the points that we need to look at collectively across Government: it is about how we use — *[Interruption.]* Is he suggesting that he is going to get rid of his livestock? Is he going to get rid of his car, his jeep? Does he not drive a jeep with a three-litre engine as well? Did I not see a green —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I remind Members to address all remarks through the Chair.

**Mr McCallister:** Mr Deputy Speaker, the Member would do well to look at his own lifestyle, as he drives a huge Isuzu Trooper Jeep, and is, of course, a livestock farmer as well.

We need to look at how we can use technology to harness that methane, and work with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and other Departments.

It is good to see that the First Minister has appeared to back up his embattled Minister of the Environment before people try to evict him from the House. *[Interruption.]* It is interesting to note that the DUP has not let —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr McCallister:** It is interesting that DUP Members have not let their colleague Jim Wells in here today to speak. I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr B Wilson:** I support the motion and the amendment, but feel that we should go much further. The Minister's response to the advertising campaign is totally unacceptable. It undermines the UK Government's policy on climate change and the Executive's Programme

for Government. The Minister is responsible for implementing the Climate Change Act 2008, but says that he does not believe in man-made climate change.

It is difficult to see how he can implement such a policy if he does not believe in it. His views are incompatible with the role of Minister of the Environment.

Instead of quoting dodgy scientists, who are sponsored by oil companies with an obvious vested interest in having people use more energy, I appeal to the Minister to attend the meeting of the all-party working group on climate change at 12.30 pm. If he were to go, he would hear from the distinguished scientist Alex Hill, the chief adviser to the Government from the Met Office in London —

**Mr Poots:** I note that the invitation to that meeting says that climate change "may" be affected. How things "may" pan out is what we are discussing; no one is definitive on this subject.

**Mr B Wilson:** If Members were to attend the meeting, they would find out about the effects of climate change.

**The Minister of the Environment:** Will the Member give way on that point?

**Mr B Wilson:** If the Minister were to go to the meeting —

**The Minister of the Environment:** Unfortunately, I will be unable to attend that meeting, and that is a great cause of concern to me. Given that the Member will be there, perhaps he will ask the representative from the Met Office how often the Hadley Centre has got its predictions wrong — I do not just mean its long-term predictions, but even its short-term predictions. Indeed, he might ask about the centre's weather predictions for this winter — I believe that it predicted that we would have one of the warmest winters on record.

**Mr B Wilson:** I will take those points on board. However, the overall argument on climate change has been won; the science proves it, and it is time that the Minister actually listened to what is being said.

The Minister's decision also raises serious questions about censorship and about whether he has the right to deny Northern Ireland viewers the opportunity to see the adverts that promote energy conservation. Given escalating energy bills and the level of fuel poverty that exists, any advice on energy conservation would be extremely useful to the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, to turn down free adverts that promote energy conservation is —

**Mr Ross:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B Wilson:** No, I am sorry; I have a great deal to get through.

When I first heard the Minister's comments, I issued a press statement — as I do regularly whenever he comments on climate change — condemning his decision. The response to my routine press statement was significant. Within 10 minutes of issuing the statement, my phone was red hot with calls from journalists throughout the islands and Europe who were asking for interviews on the subject. I got calls from the BBC News Channel, BBC Radio Foyle, 'Stormont Live', RTE's 'Newstalk', UTV, Channel 4, Citybeat, 'Drivetime' on Radio Scotland, Downtown Radio —

**Dr W McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B Wilson:** No, I am sorry; I have a limited amount of time.

There was such a response from throughout the UK because the media could not believe that an Environment Minister does not believe in climate change. That morning, I did eight TV interviews, and I did a similar number of radio broadcasts during the day. Further afield, the issue was picked up by newspapers in Australia and Canada. Why was there all that interest? A Minister of the Environment who does not believe in climate change is a major — and unique — news story throughout Europe and the world. Unfortunately, the story reinforces the view of many UK listeners that Northern Ireland people still live in the Dark Ages. The Minister certainly raised Northern Ireland's profile.

Furthermore, local public opinion —

**Dr W McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it permissible for a Member to totally mislead the House by blandly stating that the Minister does not believe in climate change? That is a totally misleading statement.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** First, the Minister will have an opportunity to respond to those statements; and secondly, it is unparliamentary to accuse a Member of misleading the House. Therefore, the Member should continue.

**Mr B Wilson:** I wish to withdraw the word "misleading". The situation, as I understand it, is that the Minister does not consider man-made climate change —

**The Minister of the Environment:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Why has the Member withdrawn something that he did not say? It was my colleague Dr William McCrea who used the word "misleading". When the Member gets it wrong, he should be punished for it, but if he has not used the word "misleading", he should not have to withdraw it — he is confused.

**Mr B Wilson:** I shall finish what I was saying.

We were overcome by public opinion. We set up a "Fire Sammy Wilson" petition to which 2,290 people have contributed. We hope to hand that petition over to the Department this afternoon. The Green Party feels that Sammy Wilson's role as the Minister of the Environment is incompatible with his views on climate change, and he should resign.

**Mr Shannon:** Many DUP Members listening to the debate feel that a modern witch-hunt is being conducted against our colleague, the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson — a man who refuses to agree with everyone else when they are adamant that the world is flat; a man who has his own opinion, which is an issue in itself.

When I was a youngster, which was not yesterday —

**Mr Weir:** If, as many of us believe, the debate is a witch-hunt on the Minister, I am sure that the Members who are behind that witch-hunt would like the Minister to be burnt at the stake in a carbon-neutral manner.  
[Laughter.]

**Mr Shannon:** I hope that no Members wish to see him burnt at the stake, but that is just my opinion.

There is, clearly, an issue about carbon emissions, which concerns me, as a parent, because my boys come home and tell me about it. We realise that there is an issue to be addressed, and the Minister has tried to do that. He has attempted to show the people of the Province that things are not as clear-cut as they appear. The fact is that opinions other than the scientific one exist, and those should be publicly expressed and considered.

**Mr Beggs:** The Member said that the Minister was trying to make the issue as clear-cut as possible. Will he not agree that the Minister is actually confusing the issue, because no one knows whether he believes that carbon emissions have any impact on climate? It would be helpful if the Minister were to indicate whether he accepts that increased CO2 emissions contribute something towards climate change.

**Mr Shannon:** The Minister will have a chance to respond to that in a few minutes.

**Mr T Clarke:** Does the Member not agree that it is more important that we work towards agreed targets rather than agreed opinions?

**Mr Shannon:** Let me put it another way: let us work together towards the targets rather than be confused by some of the issues that people have raised here.

I will give an example of the misuse of figures — and Members who represent fishing communities will understand that the scientific angle is not always right — that relates to the Irish Sea. Fishermen are prevented from landing fish that they see in their boats and on the radar but which scientists say are not there.

The real reason for that is to allow fishermen from Spain, Portugal and perhaps other European countries to catch the fish that scientists say are not there. Scientists are saying something contrary to what the fishermen are saying. That is fact, not fiction.

A simple search on the Internet of the Committee on Climate Change website shows that Northern Ireland is responsible for only 3·4% of UK carbon emissions, while England is responsible for some 77·1%. Even taking into account the size difference of land mass, if Northern Ireland equalled the size of England, with our current output, we would emit almost 28% less, which easily beats any targets that have been set. Those are facts. We are not being complacent; we are being realistic. In a global context, Northern Ireland's output is less than 1%, which means it comes last on a table of countries' carbon emissions.

I am very conscious of the time, but I want to make a couple of other comments. Most importantly, why should our devolved Government be forced to advertise party-political issues on behalf of the Labour Party? I was not aware that devolved Governments were subject to party-political pressure that transcended the constitutional powers that were devolved to them.

Oor Meinstar isnae afeert o' shakin things up – yin oonly needs tae see tha DOE adverts fer speedin' an satebelts tae unnerstuan that whun a herd lien haes tae be tuk – it wull be tuk. Hooinever, why shud we be pit doon tae shooderin a' load whuch isnae oors tae shooder.

Our Minister is not afraid to shake things up. One need only see the DOE adverts about speeding and the wearing of seat belts to understand that he takes a hard line when necessary. Why, however, should people be subjected to shouldering a burden that is not entirely theirs to shoulder?

12.15 pm

Our Minister is an educated man with a clear point of view. He is entitled to ensure that a balanced perspective is presented to the people of the Province. As I and other Members highlighted, the burden is not ours alone to shoulder. Money would be better spent on action that makes a difference to the people of the Province than on advertising.

I am a supporter of devolution, as I hope are all Members. As such, I cannot support a motion that seeks party-political decisions in the manner of direct rule. I oppose the motion and the amendment.

**The Minister of the Environment:** It is good that, once again, the House is having its usual intellectual debate on such issues. I assure the Member for South Down, Newry and Armagh, or wherever —

**Mr McCallister:** I am a Member for South Down.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I assure the Member for South Down that I feel in no way embattled today, nor have I ever felt embattled on the issue. I will never feel under pressure from the toy soldiers of the “new force” — or the new farce — who sit in that corner of the House.

I accept that a petition of concern will be presented this afternoon. However, I wish to make it clear that, since I raised the issue, my Department has received nearly 400 pieces of correspondence. Those people took the time to sit down and write letters, as opposed to sticking their names on the bottom of a petition. Of those 400 correspondents, some 80% support my stance. In a poll carried out by UTV, over 80% of the 3,000 people who took part support my stance. I have received approximately 900 letters on the subject at my constituency office, about 85% of which support me. I do not, therefore, feel embattled. The issue continues to require debate, and I am glad to have been able to stimulate it.

The debate has been one of contradictions. Anyone can count the number of 4x4s in the Assembly car park. When I did so on my way into the Building this morning, there were 10 — and I admit that one of them is mine. All 10 vehicles have engine sizes of 2·5 litres or more. Most of the cars in the car park have engines of over two litres. They probably belong to Members sitting on the Benches and giving lectures on acting —

**Mr Gallagher:** Some belong to Members from the Minister's party.

**The Minister of the Environment:** Yes; I acknowledge that.

Some Members are lecturing the Assembly on CO2 emissions. Is it any wonder that the public get sick and tired of being lectured to about the restrictions that they must bear? The Member for Lagan Valley highlighted the contradiction when he made an intervention during the Member for South Down's speech.

Some Members protest and complain about how every action taken on CO2 emissions has an impact on their constituents. At some point in the debate, I hope to have an opportunity to illustrate that further contradiction with quotes.

The ultimate contradiction, as was pointed out, is that nationalist parties tell me that, rather than the Assembly's imprint being on any action to save energy, we should simply follow, poodle-like, the example of DEFRA at Westminster. That is despite DEFRA having made it clear to me, the Scottish and Welsh Ministers, and the EU that it wishes to pursue an England-only campaign.

The debate did not start too well when the Member for East Londonderry Mr McClarty quoted one of the

presidential hopefuls in the American elections; to begin a speech with a quote from a loser is not a great start to any speech. However, a party of losers will always want to quote losers.

Let us look at some of the things that the Member said. First, he said that my stance makes people in Northern Ireland look like dangerous radicals — he probably meant to say dangerous nutcases. I will read some of the quotes that have appeared in the newspapers this week from people who are on Mr McClarty's side, and perhaps some Members on that side should do some reading on the issue.

In 'The Times' this morning, Gordon Brown's leading green adviser's solution to the dilemma that we face with climate change is to cut the UK population by 30 million. Who is the nutcase? I know that my party has proposed that the Assembly should be cut in half, but we do not mean that Members should be eradicated — we simply mean that we should get them out of this place to save a bit of money.

A book by James Lovelock was serialised in 'The Sunday Times'. I bought the book because I thought that the newspaper quoted him wrongly, as he went even further and said that the things that have to be done to solve the problem are so radical that we might have to suspend democracy. Again, who is the nutcase?

Professor James Hansen recently gave evidence to the public inquiry into the Kingsnorth coal-fired power station, and he compared it to the gas chambers. He compared the trains that brought the coal to the cattle trucks that brought people to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. That is the kind of nonsense that we are hearing from some people who are allied to Mr McClarty.

Mr McClarty went on to talk about the importance of messages on energy saving. I have no difficulty with such messages. Indeed, the Executive put out messages on energy saving. My Department is not actually responsible for that — it is the responsibility of the Department for Social Development. Perhaps SDLP Members could take the matter up with their Minister, because the Energy Saving Trust deliberately decided not to sign up to the Act on CO2 advertisements and went down the route of commissioning its own advertisement. I do not know how much that cost. Sinn Féin is also getting precious about the issue, but the Department for Regional Development also decided not to sign up to the Act on CO2 advertisements, and it put out its own energy saving messages.

**Mr I McCrea:** Given that the Minister has referred to two Departments so far, have the Ministers of those Departments ever raised their concerns or opposition to his actions?

**The Minister of the Environment:** No, they have not raised their concerns, even though I wrote to them. The Scottish and Welsh Ministers have said that there

is a need to tailor messages to a local population, and decisions were made to not use the DEFRA campaign. Indeed, I made an offer to the Minister of the Department of Energy and Climate Change that we could examine a UK-wide energy saving advertisement, which could be used by all Administrations. That was six months ago, but I have yet to hear from him. Therefore, let us not get the idea that I want to waste energy.

The energy conservation messages are going out. However, it is not just me who has decided not to use the Act on CO2 line — other Departments have also decided not to use it. As I pointed out in an earlier intervention, DEFRA is beginning to realise that there is a kickback, and it is realising that my view that energy saving should be emphasised, rather than acting on CO2, is a much more effective way of getting the message across.

**Dr W McCrea:** In light of the information about those two Departments, which are represented by the very people who are trying to take action against the Minister, is it not really proof that the motion is nothing more than a stunt?

**The Minister of the Environment:** We all know that it is a stunt, but I do not mind. They can engage in stunts if they wish; I think that the public will understand that also.

Mr McClarty also waxed eloquently —

**A Member:** He did not.

**The Minister of the Environment:** Well, perhaps he did not wax eloquently, but he spoke about my view of the impact of the renewables obligation, and the benefits that we might receive from that. However, as has been pointed out, he sat through this morning's debate on that issue and did not have a word to say about it.

However, I cannot miss out Mr Gallagher, who is, of course, very concerned about this matter. He moved the motion of no confidence in the Environment Committee, and when I visited the Committee, he did not attend. Perhaps that shows just how concerned he was. He had the opportunity; I was at the Committee for two-and-a-half hours and he could have questioned me at length and given me the benefit of his scientific views. However, I do not believe that scientific views that are based in the pre-Galilean era are of much use in discussing this issue.

Galileo — and perhaps I should tell Mr Gallagher this — discovered that the earth actually revolves around the sun; not that the sun revolves round the earth. The sun does not move closer to the earth. Mr Gallagher told me that I had ignored the science. I would love to know — and I will give way to him

— whether he can tell me one scientist whose work on this issue he has read —

**Mr Shannon:** Go ahead, Tommy. *[Laughter.]*

**The Minister of the Environment:** Well, I think that he is getting the message. I would give him his chance, but I do not have much time left. At least, before I stand up and make a decision or give an opinion, I do the House the favour of reading up on an issue. I would be happy to engage with Mr Gallagher on some of the scientific evidence that I have looked at on this issue. Perhaps, at some stage, he might like to debate that and invite me along to the Committee to give my views.

Had Mr Gallagher been at the Committee when I visited, I would have had the opportunity to tell him how he has acted on CO<sub>2</sub>, because Mr Gallagher has become known as the Christopher Columbus from Fermanagh. According to his mileage claim for last year, he has twice circumnavigated the world in pursuit of his Assembly duties. It is a wonder that he has any time to come here; he must spend most of his time in the car. *[Laughter.]*

During that time, he has generated more than 20 tons of carbon; he is the carbon king of this Assembly. There is a perfectly good express bus from Enniskillen to Belfast, and I will give him the timetable for it, if he wants it. Had he used that bus and acted on CO<sub>2</sub>, he would have generated only 6.84 tons of carbon and could have reduced his carbon footprint by 60%. Did he do it? Not on your life, because acting on CO<sub>2</sub> is for someone else, not for Mr Gallagher.

**Mr Gallagher:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I know that he does not visit the west very often and may not know the geography very well, but I do not live in Enniskillen. In fact, for me to drive to Enniskillen to get the express bus that he referred to would take 45 minutes. I think that the Minister might do better by finding out exactly where I live and what the implications are for travel before making such a song and dance about it.

**The Minister of the Environment:** That is why the Member's party has encouraged people to use park-and-ride facilities. With those facilities, one drives to the station, parks one's vehicle and then rides on public transport. Perhaps the Member has not heard of park-and-ride.

There are alternatives. Mr Gallagher has talked about acting on CO<sub>2</sub>, but he has not shown any evidence that he is prepared to act in that way himself.

12.30 pm

Mr Ford, who is not in his place, said that I had done all that I am obliged to do. I have done that, and I will continue to do so. However, he said that I had not shown leadership on the issue and that I had not got

into the spirit of it. I have looked at his record — he may say the right words, but look at his actions. Mr Ford welcomed the launch of Aer Lingus flights from Belfast International Airport, which was a good catch for the South Antrim constituency.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Minister draw his remarks to a close?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I have one minute.

Mr Ford welcomed that. Aeroplanes generate CO<sub>2</sub>, but he realised that his constituents would benefit.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Minister's time is up.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I would have loved to have had time to go through the comments that other Members made. The one thing that I will say is that this decision was made on the basis that, first, I wanted to ensure that the Northern Ireland Assembly had its place; secondly, I wanted to ensure that we had an effective message; and, thirdly, I did not want to use propaganda put out by DEFRA in England.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I realise that I have five minutes, so I will be as concise as possible. Mr McClarty said that the Minister is at variance with the Department, the public and the stance that has been enunciated publicly by the Executive. He also mentioned the planet Exxon.

My colleague Mr Gallagher mentioned the incompatibility of the Minister's views with the Programme for Government. He also spoke about the Queen's University study on the efficiency of outputs and contribution to greenhouse gases.

I listened raptly to Mr Weir's contribution. He is not in the Chamber now, but there was a common thread in the contributions from the DUP Benches. He used examples of every other Department's ability to meet the targets relating to greenhouse gases and the protection of the environment. He showed how it is done, but wanted us not to look at his Minister and what he has not done, or, in fact, what he has said.

Mr Boylan referred to the lack of leadership and example that is being shown by the Minister.

Mr Ford referred to the need for a cross-departmental approach to the renewables issue — the warm homes scheme, public transport, etc.

Mr McKay mentioned the Environment Committee's vote of no confidence in the Minister. I was at that Committee meeting.

Ian McCrea said that the Minister was right not to support the advertisements, and he drew attention to my colleague Margaret Ritchie, who, I am glad to say, showed leadership in this area and showed the way forward. I am glad to see that, in highlighting that, the Member was, inadvertently, complimenting her for her

leadership and for the example that she showed in that regard.

**Mr I McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGlone:** I do not have time to give way, because this is the winding-up speech on the amendment.

We then came to the Minister. I saw students in the Gallery during the debate, and I wondered what they were learning from it. Mention was made of contradictions relating to car parking; the American election; party politics; Gordon Brown's adviser; the suspension of democracy; gas chambers; Galileo; stunts; and Christopher Columbus. The Minister dealt with anything except the real issue.

The real issue should be read into the record. It was interesting that the Minister did not even show up for the hour-and-a-half debate on earth hour. His colleague Minister Dodds responded on the matter. His other colleague — Mr Wells, the "Mr Green" of the DUP — is absent today. It is important that the reasons why action on climate change is urgent are read into the record.

Successive reports of the UN intergovernmental panel on climate change, the most recent of which involved over 3,800 scientists from over 150 countries, have put the reality of human-induced climate change beyond any doubt. Evidence indicates that cuts in global greenhouse gas emissions are needed to keep the global average temperature rise below 2°C above pre-industrial levels. If that is not attended to, it could have the following implications: in Africa, potentially, between 350 million and 600 million people will suffer water shortages; in Asia, up to one billion people will suffer water shortages, as supplies dwindle; in Australia and New Zealand, there will be between 3,000 and 5,000 more heat-related deaths a year. That is the reality of what we face. Furthermore, in Latin America, up to 77 million people will face water shortages.

I am not here to get sucked into the mire, the morass and, indeed, the mists of flippancy that have been bounced about here today. That is the reality of climate change; that is why the SDLP tabled its amendment to the motion. I am glad — indeed, honoured — to have been associated with the amendment that Mr Gallagher has crafted and brought before the Assembly today. I welcome the support from other Members for that.

The Minister must set aside the flippancy and treat a ministry with responsibility for the environment as exactly that. We must deal with the world realities that we face; this is not a narrow, sectional, party-political or, indeed, parochial issue. I acknowledge that the Minister received 400 letters of support — it is great to have a fan club.

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

**Mr McGlone:** However, this issue is much more important than having a fan club. I ask Members to please support the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Beggs:** I ask Members to read the motion carefully. It indicates the concern about the attempt to restrict the viewing of the Act on CO2 message in Northern Ireland and the failure to fulfil Programme for Government requirements. Therefore, the motion is not a stunt; it addresses some very serious issues.

A petition of concern was presented, and it would appear that every member of the DUP has signed that, other than the Minister of the Environment, who may have signed it and then had his signature scored out. I am not quite sure what happened, but the evidence given to me indicates that every member of the DUP signed the petition of concern, which was intended to block the vote on the motion.

A number of Members, including David McClarty, Tommy Gallagher and Daithí McKay, have highlighted how the Minister's position is contrary to the targets set out in the Programme for Government, and that is also stated in the motion. There are very specific references in the Programme for Government that one cannot dance around. For example, it states that we will:

"play our part in addressing this challenge by reducing our impact on climate change."

If it is the case that we can have an impact by adding to climate change, the opposite is also true: that is, we can have an impact on reducing climate change. The Programme for Government accepts that we are having an impact on climate change and that it is possible to take actions to minimise that. That document also mentions our "carbon footprint". Therefore, in attempting to ban the Act on CO2 advertisements because of his personal beliefs, the Minister is acting against the Programme for Government. That document also includes a specific target to:

"Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025".

The documentation representing Northern Ireland that was sent by the Minister of the Environment to Ed Miliband, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, is concerning. In that letter, the Minister of the Environment states:

"This campaign promotes anthropogenic climate change as gospel and as you are no doubt aware, this is contrary to my views as Minister of the Environment in Northern Ireland. I do not believe that man-made greenhouse gas emissions are the main cause of climate change and I do not believe that the 'Act On' messaging should appear in Northern Ireland."

The Minister is imposing his personal views; there is no doubt about that. As I said earlier, that is contrary to the Programme for Government, and that is the reason for the motion. There is a serious intent behind the motion being proposed. The Minister's letter continues:

"I do not wish to see 'Act On' used in Northern Ireland and I do not wish for climate change messages to be promoted by other Whitehall departments here."

The Minister is even attempting to restrict Whitehall Departments communicating any message here. He proposes some very interesting aspects. He writes:

"I propose the following Principles of Working for officials to follow across the UK"

Of which point No 4 is:

"No 'Act On' media promotion can be bought in a Devolved Administration unless approved by that Administration."

This is an interesting bit:

"Leakage must be minimised using postcode lockouts, when available,"

If that is not attempting to ban an advertisement, I do not know what is.

He goes on:

"and the additional costs this may incur should be factored in to the resource requirement and the value for money assessment of the media promotion."

We have our Minister trying to dictate additional costs to the entire United Kingdom to promote his personal views. That is not credible: hence the reason for bringing the motion forward.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** We have had a debate. I am attempting to sum up the debate. It is important to appreciate that.

The Minister wrote to not only Ed Miliband, but to Geoff Hoon, the Secretary of State for Transport, stating:

"your officials have attempted to launch a UK wide campaign on eco-driving".

How terrible for the Secretary of State for Transport to try to encourage energy efficiency in driving. The rest of the United Kingdom is trying to promote those views. Northern Ireland is being ridiculed in the eyes of the rest of the United Kingdom.

I could have understood if that had come from a Scottish-nationalist-dominated Minister in Edinburgh. However, I find it strange that a unionist Minister is taking that stance, is trying to separate Northern Ireland, and is ridiculing Northern Ireland as regards actions that are taking place in other parts of the United Kingdom. There has been a major failure on the part of the Minister to give leadership in that area.

I will now turn briefly to some of the comments made by other Members. David McClarty highlighted an issue to which I have still not heard an answer: is the Minister a fool, or is he deliberately misleading others for political and other ends? I have not heard the answer to that. I specifically asked during an intervention whether the Minister believed that climate change was in any way affected by man, and the Minister failed to respond. He used language to

suggest that he does not believe that it is the main factor, but does he believe that man contributes to it? We still have no answer to that question. Until the Minister accepts the Programme for Government, and accepts that man does contribute to climate change, he is not giving leadership on the matter.

Tommy Gallagher called on us all to endeavour individually. This is a real issue, and we all have to try to take action. For the record, Minister, I have changed my car: I have a Mini with much lower CO2 emissions within the stable that my wife and I have. I find it rather cheap for the Minister to go on the attack, and pick individual members of the Committee for the Environment and produce figures on their CO2 emissions. He is trying to deflect from a very serious issue.

**Mr T Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** I am trying to sum up my views, and I will not be deflected on that matter.

Mr Weir said that the Minister was not acting against the Programme for Government. I hope that I have demonstrated clearly that the Minister's action is acting against the Programme for Government.

Cathal Boylan highlighted the fact that the Act on CO2 message also contained an issue about energy efficiency. Given the way that oil prices have been going, that is something on which we all need to start to take action now. We all ought to be trying to reduce our energy consumption and, thereby, reduce our CO2 consumption.

We should bear in mind that oil has peaked. The world's oil supply is diminishing and that is why the price of oil went through the roof over a year ago. Yes, the world's economy is in decline and there is now less demand for oil. However, one cannot invent new oil. We get one go at using it, and it cannot be reinvented. There can be no doubt that oil is a diminishing supply and, therefore, we should be acting accordingly.

Some Members asked why we should accept all that scientific evidence. It is the best evidence that is available and there are credible theories behind it. Members should remember that, a short time ago, there was the issue of the ozone layer opening up, thereby enabling greater levels of light to enter and affect the earth's climate — particularly at the Antarctic — and a decision was taken to ban CFCs.

Guess what happened — the scientists got it right. The hole in the ozone layer has started to close again, so sometimes scientists get things right. Until there is evidence to the contrary, we should act on this matter, not only to protect the environment and minimise climate change, but also to protect our pockets — as the Minister and others have said — and to protect us all against the diminishing oil supply.

12.45 pm

David Ford highlighted the need to legislate on these issues. There can be no doubt about that. He also pointed out that the Minister must lead by example, which has not happened. Alastair Ross seems to be a sceptic. It seems that he is happy to follow the Scottish nationalist agenda and simply do something different for the sake of being different.

I thank the Assembly's Research Services for obtaining transcripts of the advertisements. No one who reads those advertisements will see anything offensive in them. I hope that many people will take the opportunity to read them. It is important that we move on and that proper action is taken. It is important that we respect the Programme for Government and take action to protect our environment.

The Minister loves attacking others, but he drives a 4x4 "Chelsea tractor". What sort of example is that for the Minister of the Environment to set? The Minister is also a double-jobber, so he probably flies to and from Westminster in one day. He must have a huge carbon footprint. There is no doubt that, on occasion, he flies back and forwards two or three times each week in order to do both jobs. There are very practical issues that indicate that he is not setting a good example as an Environment Minister. I wish that he would take that aspect of his job more seriously and lead by example on this issue.

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

**Mr Beggs:** I support the motion, and I am content with the amendment.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 44; Noes 29.*

#### AYES

*Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Gallagher and Mr McGlone.*

#### NOES

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

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr T Clarke and Mr I McCrea.*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that a valid petition of concern on the motion has been presented. Therefore, the vote on the motion will be postponed until a time to be determined by the Business Committee.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed that the vote on the motion on the Act on CO2 advertising campaign will be the first item of business on Monday 30 March.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Primary Schools

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

**Mr Storey:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the findings in the recent report from the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate that in primary schools the overall quality of provision was not good enough in one third of schools; that standards attained were not good enough in one quarter; that there was too significant a variation in the standards of literacy and numeracy attained; that the quality of teaching was in need of improvement in one lesson in every five; that the quality of planning was inadequate in one school in every ten; and that the quality of principals' leadership is an area for improvement in one quarter of schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to place greater focus in early years and primary education, including the low level of funding and the pupil-teacher ratio, encouraging greater parental involvement and placing a greater emphasis on early intervention and numeracy and literacy.

This afternoon, not only in this debate but in that which will follow, we will deal with issues that are of the utmost importance to many, if not all, families in Northern Ireland. As a result of these debates, we will have a focus, for the right reasons, in relation to education.

We are lectured regularly about how an education system in Northern Ireland — which matches pupils to the most appropriate school for their individual needs — somehow leads to inequality and low levels of performance. That is a tired argument that the Minister has regularly sought to employ. She has tried to present herself as a champion of equality and excellence when, in fact, she represents neither of those.

However, when we get down to considering the information — the facts of the case — the reality is very different. That is where the Minister has often run

into difficulties in the past. She has an inability to decipher facts and acknowledge, let alone face up to, realities. Nonetheless, the evidence remains: stark and true, it continues to cry against the Minister in her policies, practices and priorities.

According to the Education and Training Inspectorate's 'Chief Inspector's Report 2006-2008', we are forced to conclude that it is not just the case that the Minister fails when she does not prioritise: she also fails when she does prioritise.

Let me give an example. Consider Irish-language education, which is something to which the Minister has given priority and into which the education system pours some £20 million of public funds. At this juncture, I must say that, unfortunately, the Minister has used the Irish language as a political weapon.

What did the chief inspector's report have to say about the Irish-medium sector? It said that there had been a slowdown in the growth of the Irish-medium primary sector. Crucially, it also said:

"Teachers across the sector need to pay due attention to developing their own Irish language competence."

It did not refer to "excellence" but merely to "competence".

There is a world of difference between excellence and competence. The Minister might aspire to excellence in the performance of her duties; the rest of us would be pleased if she could simply improve the state of competence.

According to the chief inspector's report, even with regard to the Minister's pet project — the Irish-medium sector — she has failed. The obvious conclusion is that there are teachers in the Irish-medium sector who are barely competent, if at all.

Let us consider a few more facts. Long before pupils sit assessment at the ages of 10 or 11, there are differences. For example, the millennium cohort study found that by the age of three, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are already one year behind more advantaged children in their social and educational development. The Minister has sought to blame academic selection for all the educational ills of Northern Ireland. By that, of course, I refer to academic selection at 11 years of age; not three years of age.

In the Minister's world, the influence of grammar schools and the effect of academic selection at age 11 in some way reaches down through the years to three-year-olds, and is the primary cause of all the disadvantages in the education system. Surely, that cannot be the case. Anyone with eyes to see ought to be able to conclude that that is not so. It ought to be clear that those types of differences are not the fault of the selective system or of grammar schools, nor are they down to academic selection at age 11. If the

Minister really wishes to deal with inequality and if she is really in the equality business, she would prioritise that fact instead of her failed attempts to impose her ideology on Northern Ireland.

The fact is that children who attend a good quality preschool have better cognitive and intellectual outcomes. There is a marked difference between them and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research from the United States indicates that investment in preschool education can bring about long-term savings up to 13 fold. That demonstrates the need to invest more in early-years provision and in primary provision. We still await the Minister's decision as to what is happening for children between birth and the age of six. We wait, we wait and we wait.

The chief inspector's report outlines a number of areas in which primary provision must improve. Taking that report in the round, it does not make good bedtime reading for Northern Ireland's education system. There are issues that need to be addressed and there are issues that must be addressed. Overall standards; varied literacy and numeracy levels; quality of teaching; quality of planning; and quality of leadership at senior management levels are all issues that the inspector highlighted and that need to be tackled. It is through tackling those matters that we can make improvements, not through continuing to talk down the successes in our education system, which is the envy of others.

We must improve outcomes for everyone. We cannot afford to have young people with no qualifications. However, the level of underachievement in Northern Ireland is not as significant as the Minister and others would have us believe. I know that the Minister is somewhat concerned about the issue of achievement. Look at the report from the chief inspector, and look at the research that was requested by the Education Committee back in December. That information contradicts the Education Minister's persistent claims about high levels of underachievement in Northern Ireland's education system. Of the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom, only England performed marginally better than Northern Ireland in relation to the percentage of pupils who received no grade results at GCSE level in 2005-06. Northern Ireland's figure of 3.1% was much less than Scotland's 4.6% or Wales's 6.8%. Furthermore, the percentage of Northern Ireland pupils who failed to achieve at least five A to C grades at GCSE level was the lowest of the four home nations by some distance.

Not only is there the information received by the Education Committee, and the inspector's report, there is another assessment contained in the programme for international student assessment (PISA) results. So often, the PISA results are used by the Minister to indicate that we are failing and that we are falling far

behind. However, what did PISA find in its assessment of our education system?

It says that Northern Ireland's performance is broadly in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; we outperform the OECD average in science, and Wales with respect to reading. We want every pupil in Northern Ireland to reach their potential, and my party will continue to develop a number of proposals to seek to improve and seek to ensure that we move forward.

The Minister must address seriously the issue of special needs, which is included in the report. We are still waiting for the Minister's final view on the future of special needs. The chief inspector makes particular reference in the report to special needs. He is very concerned about the provision and about what is happening in special-needs schools. In fact, he made reference to the challenges in special-needs schools. I ask the Minister whether she is prepared to consider those and to meet the DUP and other Members to address the issue of special-needs schools.

There are worries in particular boards because special units are being closed down and the Minister still has not brought forward her proposals. She has accused my party of blocking those proposals. In the light of the report and of the concerns that are out there, will she explain how she will address those needs?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo.

I support the motion. That may be a surprise for some who listened to Mr Storey's speech. However, unlike the Alliance Party, which was somewhat sensitive about Sinn Féin's contributions to a debate yesterday, we support the motion, not the contributions from the Members on the opposite Benches.

After listening to Mr Storey, I am not sure what motion I am rising to support. Is it an anti-Irish-language motion? Is it a motion to attack the Minister? Or is it a serious attempt to improve standards in primary schools? The wording of the motion concerns improving standards in primary schools and reflecting on the inspectorate's report.

Mr Storey singled out the Irish-language sector for, in his words, "underachievement", but, given the mammoth task with which that sector has been presented and the mountain that it has had to climb, its achievements are amazing. Can there be improvements? Yes, there can be, and there should be. Should there be investment in the Irish-language sector? Of course.

Parents want their children taught in the medium of Irish, just as other parents want their children to be taught in the medium of English. Under the Good Friday Agreement and the 1998 Act, parents have every right to have their children taught in Irish. The

Department of Education, under the stewardship of Sinn Féin, will ensure that that right is protected.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will not give way at this stage.

Academic selection is the old favourite issue. If the Members opposite were to listen to what Members on this side of the Chamber said, they would realise that we do not blame all of the woes of the education system on academic selection. However, when children in primary schools are divided halfway through the year and one set is sent to one side of the room and given colouring pencils and the other set is sent to the other side of the room and taught towards the test, there is no way that achievement in schools can be equal across the sector.

Sinn Féin recognises that there is good in the education system and that there is also poor management and skills. That is why the Minister has set out a programme of policies which are all centred on the principle of improving standards across the education sector.

The inspectorate's report is stark reading, but it should be a surprise to no one. The Members opposite have lectured this side of the House on many occasions, saying that we have a world-class education system.

2.15 pm

My party says that we do not have a world-class education system, but that within the system there are world-class educationalists providing excellent education. However, the system itself is not world class. Therefore, all the policies that the Minister has brought forward aim to improve standards: the introduction and support of the revised curriculum; 'Every School a Good School'; the education and skills authority (ESA); and investment in schools.

**Mr Storey:** If, as the Member says, those are all improvements, why is there a chorus of people, such as the Catholic bishops, telling the Member's party and the House that serious issues with respect to the ESA must be addressed because it is not capable of delivering the very improvements that he says are paramount to education?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Catholic bishops are telling us that they are concerned that the Catholic ethos will not be preserved under the ESA. I am glad that the Member is defending that the Catholic ethos be taught in schools.

**Mr Storey:** I did not say that.

**Mr O'Dowd:** That is what the Catholic bishops have said: they are concerned that the Catholic ethos will not be preserved in schools under the ESA. If the DUP supports that demand, that is an honourable statement from that party. Sinn Féin protects the rights of schools to maintain their ethos. The Catholic

Church has every right to protect the ethos of Catholic schools. If there has to be —

**Mr McCausland:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will, in one moment.

The reason why the time to deal with the Education Bill has been extended is in order to hear as many views as possible — as the Chairperson of the Education Committee, Mr Storey, has, quite rightly, said — and to facilitate further discussion if needed. I will give way to Mr McCausland.

**Mr McCausland:** Will the Member, therefore, assure the House that he will support, in every way, the ethos of the controlled sector and the cultural rights of children who are educated in that sector? Will he ensure that as the Minister tries to move forward with the ESA, that that will, indeed, be enshrined in legislation?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I can assure the Member. My party advocates a sectoral support group for the controlled sector so that the cultural ethos of schools in that sector is protected.

I want to deal with Mr Storey's final comments, in which he referred to special educational needs. Seriously — I must say that I am amazed that the Member opposite is able to stand in the Chamber and demand that the Education Minister tells the House what she is doing about special educational needs when his party, and his party alone, has blocked investment of £25 million in special educational needs because of its religious fundamentalist views on life. You are not prepared to allow children of single parents to be treated in an equitable way in the education system.

The review of special educational needs is vitally important for the education system. Your party — and your party alone — is blocking it. You cannot, therefore, stand in the Chamber and demand that someone else does something that you are blocking.

**Mr K Robinson:** I commend the Members who have brought a most important motion to the House.

The motion highlights the stark fact that our education system is in disarray. Children, parents and teachers face uncertainty as the current school year moves towards its final term. While the Minister gallops along on her ideological crusade — for all the world resembling "Donna Quixote" as she tilts at the windmills of post-primary provision — her Department still fails to address the problems highlighted in the damning Audit Office report 'Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools', published in 2006, which showed that targets were not achieved despite investment of around £40 million.

At that time, the Department's response was that a review of the school-improvement programme was also planned. At present, that same Department has

more reviews under way than there are in the West End. It has reviews into provision for children from nought-to-six, literacy and numeracy, special education, teacher education, ICT, and so on.

This timely report by chief inspector Goudie notes that “provision is simply not good enough” and “standards are too low”. He states:

“Learners are thereby significantly disadvantaged and, as a result, our society as a whole is diminished. In short, there is still much work to be done to raise expectations and to close the achievement gap.”

Those are the chief inspector’s words, not mine.

I want to address the areas in which it is glaringly obvious that action, rather than review, would make a significant difference to the educational prospects of all our children.

Paragraph 33 of the inspector’s report notes the lack of positive role models, especially for boys. The Department has failed to address the issue of the low percentage of males who are entering the profession and the disturbingly low number of male teachers in full-time posts, especially in early-years classes in primary schools. Most male teachers tend to be in the older age range, and, as they retire, the percentage of male role models will continue to decrease, specifically in areas that are already marginalised. Action is required, Minister.

Young teachers leaving college are unable to gain full-time employment and, consequently, to expand their professional expertise. Furthermore, the continual loss of the most experienced members of the profession dilutes the impact of the teaching force in the classroom. Despite a guideline issued by the Department in 1992 — if I remember correctly — problems associated with the re-employment of retirees to the detriment of young teachers are still unaddressed. Action is required, Minister.

A significant number of pupils in primary schools have special educational needs that must be identified quickly. Individual programmes must be put in place to remedy the problems, and support must be given to parents, pupils and teachers in order to help them address those issues. However, there is a shortage of educational psychologists across the five education and library boards. That has caused a horrendous backlog of pupils who are waiting to be assessed in schools, and schools are being forced to draw up lists to deal with the allocated number of pupils that need to be seen. Action is required, Minister.

For many years, composite classes have been a common feature in smaller rural primary schools where, because of the expertise of teachers, the supportive approach of parents and pupils’ excellent attitudes to education, a good quality of education has been maintained. However, the number of composite classes

in schools in urban areas, where attitudes to school are often less than positive, is increasing. In that setting, composite classes do not help the drive to raise literacy and numeracy standards. Action is required, Minister.

Primary schools are struggling, and principals have highlighted the inadequate funding of primary schools and the cumulative impact that that has had on schools that are trying to balance their moneys. It considerably increases the burden on principals in the day-to-day running of their schools. After all, principal teachers are not trained accountants: they are trained teachers. Again, action is required.

Now enters the answer to all our educational woes — the ESA. That wonder horse will raise standards. However, the Roman Catholic Church, the controlled sector, the integrated sector, the voluntary sector and a wide range of politicians, including those on the Education Committee, have reservations. Moreover, the chief inspector said:

“There is a real and significant challenge ahead for ESA in fulfilling these purposes, while establishing a more sustainable system and meeting parental choice through the maintenance of differing types of provision.”

Finally —

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

**Mr K Robinson:** I have said repeatedly in the House that children do not fail at the age of 11; the current system fails them long before they reach that age. Indeed, it is failing many in our —

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

**Mr K Robinson:** — marginalised communities before they even enter formal education. Urgent action is required, Minister.

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

**Mr K Robinson:** I support the motion.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo inniu.

I am pleased to participate in the debate, and I thank the Members who have brought the matter to the Assembly.

I congratulate the schools, and I congratulate the teachers who are doing a good job and achieving good standards. As the chief inspector’s report has highlighted, there is, undoubtedly, need for improvement in some areas. The motion tends to focus on the empty part of the glass and highlights the negative rather than the positive. Having said that, I am not suggesting that we can afford to be complacent. We must continually strive to ensure that the proposals outlined in the chief inspector’s report are implemented and that subsequent reports do not constantly revisit the same areas.

It is totally unacceptable that in one third of our primary schools the quality of provision is not good enough. However, the motion homes in on the primary sector and largely ignores other sectors, including the post-primary sector. We need to consider the whole education system that is the subject of the report.

One area that I found noteworthy is that of literacy and numeracy, which has already been mentioned. In light of all the investment that has already been made in that area, and of the Westminster Public Accounts Committee's report and other reports, it is somewhat alarming that the chief inspector is still questioning the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation of literacy and numeracy in primary schools. One fifth of pupils are failing to reach standards appropriate to their age by the time they leave primary school, and we are told that there is insufficient intervention for those children with difficulties in numeracy.

One would have thought that, by this stage, literacy and numeracy would be a priority in most primary schools, at least to the extent that monitoring and evaluation would be taking place across the board. It is difficult for schools to take corrective action if the problems are not being identified. Without effective monitoring and evaluation in schools, the effectiveness of any future literacy and numeracy strategy will be very much weakened.

It is pleasing to learn from the report that the quality of leadership and management in three quarters of primary schools is good or better. However, it is disappointing that in one quarter of primary and post-primary schools the leadership does not reach that standard and is, in fact, in need of improvement.

School-development planning is mentioned by the inspectorate as an area in need of improvement. Leadership is key in the success of any school, and without adequate leadership the whole school effort is weakened, and pupils' learning suffers as a result. We cannot tolerate a situation in which school leadership is insufficient in one quarter of primary and post-primary schools. The inspectorate proposes more effective and robust processes —

**Mr K Robinson:** The Member makes a valid point. Does the criticism of leadership in schools not highlight the fact that the principals of those schools are being asked to take on a burden over and above the educational burden that they have been trained to assume and are being asked to carry out administrative and social-inclusion tasks, and a whole plethora of things that have been added to the burden of a principal in recent years? Is that not the point that I was making earlier, and will the Member not agree with me on that?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will have one extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr D Bradley:** I thank the Member for his intervention. It is commonly recognised in schools that the number of initiatives having to be dealt with by school leaders is placing an intolerable burden on them. There is obviously a need for greater support for school leaders — not only support, but continual professional development — that will enable them to meet the challenges that are outlined in the chief inspector's report.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

I also welcome the fact that 80% of lessons taught are good or better and that 50% of those lessons are deemed to be good or outstanding. We should acknowledge that achievement, but we cannot accept a situation in which 20% of lessons taught are not up to standard. Almost one third of the lessons observed in post-primary schools are in need of improvement, with one fifth of English lessons requiring improvement strategies. A regression has been noted in pupils' numeracy skills at the stage of transition between primary and post-primary education. It is also worrying that the quality of planning in 10% of primary schools is in need of improvement.

Many improvements have been noted by the inspectorate, and we should congratulate schools on those achievements, but there are still major areas in need of further improvement. There is a huge amount of work to be done, and the report illustrates the challenge that the new education and skills authority will face. However, I believe that, with proper support and back-up resources from the Minister and the Department, schools will meet that challenge. Go raibh mile maith agat.

2.30 pm

**Mr Lunn:** The Alliance Party will support the motion. Through you, Mr Speaker, I ask Mr O'Dowd to check the figures, whereupon he will find that my party has supported Sinn Féin motions more often than his party has supported DUP ones.

We support the motion for mainly the final section, which calls on the Minister to take the various initiatives outlined in the motion. The final line, which asks for:

“a greater emphasis on early intervention and numeracy and literacy.”

highlights the nub of the problem. The present system, as has been highlighted by the chief inspector, is failing our children, particularly those who live in areas of high social deprivation. In the words of his report:

“Improving the standards in literacy and numeracy remains a major challenge”.

He says that there is a need to raise standards overall, and:

"Schools must ensure ... that all of their pupils, whatever their ability, achieve a level of essential skills in line with their full potential."

Mr Storey made the same point about potential. We do not have to produce Einsteins; we just have to ensure that we get the best out of everyone.

All of that surely points directly towards targeted early intervention to nip the problem in the bud and avoid statistics such as those contained in the chief inspector's report about attainment standards in reading, writing and arithmetic at transfer age. We know that, left unattended, those deficiencies will carry through to the end of school age and into later life. How can pupils progress to higher learning if they are lacking in basic reading skills? I have no problem with that section of the motion; the rest of it gives me some cause for concern.

The chief inspector noted that the overall quality of provision was not good enough in one third of primary schools, and that standards attained were not good enough in one quarter of primary schools. That means that he is quite satisfied with those that were attained in two thirds and three quarters of primary schools, as Dominic Bradley rightly pointed out. For me, however, the chief inspector's primary concern was about the proportion of our workforce that is lacking completely in qualifications. It is interesting, therefore, that the proposers of the motion and their party seem so wedded to the educational system that has delivered that outcome. The chief inspector also highlighted the problem of the uncertainty about post-primary transfer. We will debate that issue later, so I mention it only to highlight to the Minister that yet another important voice has emphasised that there is extreme and widespread concern.

The three clauses of the motion that emphasise the inspector's comments about the quality of teaching, the inadequacy of planning and the quality of principals' leadership cause me concern. Ken Robinson rightly referred to that a moment ago when he mentioned the burdens that are placed on head teachers. It is one thing for the chief inspector of schools to mention those things in a dispassionate and analytical manner in the context of a wide-ranging report. It is quite another to see them highlighted in a brief Assembly motion that does not commend the many good outcomes that are noted in the report. Teachers, and particularly principals, who are watching this debate will need reassurance, especially from the proposers of the motion, that it is not an attack on their professional standards. Other DUP contributors to the debate will, perhaps, comment on that.

**Mr Storey:** I am quite happy to respond to that point. My party has always valued, as have others, the educational excellence of our teaching profession. However, no one — the Minister or any of us — can

say that the report does not have an important role to play in informing us and ensuring that we put in place mechanisms that can address the issues that are raised in the report.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr Lunn:** I accept what the Member says.

Morale is low enough in our schools, and those who work in them are among our best, but hardest-pressed, public servants. Ken Robinson is absolutely right about the demands that are placed on head teachers in particular. Having said that, I commend the final section of the motion, and my party will support it. It is indisputable that our primary schools are a comparatively underfunded part of our schools system, and that, as a result, much of the work that is required to boost basic literacy and numeracy cannot proceed. That is a ludicrous situation. We end up spending huge amounts of public money on literacy and numeracy in later life, when the problem can much more easily be solved right at the start of a child's education. I am sure that we all agree about that, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

**Miss McIlveen:** It goes without saying that my party values the contribution of staff in our schools, but we cannot ignore, in the words of the chief inspector, that we are failing substantial numbers of our children and their families, and are failing in our provision.

The issue is not, nor should it be, about party politics or academic selection. However, it should be focused on the scandal of how, in the twenty-first century, there is a failure to meet the most basic needs of more than 20% of our children in the education system. It should be about how we intend to dress this matter because, blatantly, the current strategies have failed to work.

The chief inspector's report makes sobering reading and identifies clearly that one fifth of children leave primary school after seven years without the ability to read, write and count to the appropriate standard. A total of 40% of children leave primary school without reaching the appropriate standard in numeracy. That is simply unacceptable, and has enormous consequences for those children in respect of their future educational achievements and employment prospects. That signifies gross educational inequality, because those children are primarily from the most disadvantaged areas and backgrounds.

Children who are entitled to free school meals are twice as likely to leave school without any qualifications. Care-leavers are 20 times more likely to leave school without any educational qualifications. As few as 23% of pupils from the most deprived backgrounds achieve five or more GCSEs, compared with 64% of pupils

from other backgrounds across Northern Ireland. Of the total number of young people who took GCSEs last year, 25% failed to gain a single pass at grade C, effectively depriving them of any qualification that is valued by employers.

As children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds go through the education system, they fall further behind. That creates an ever-widening opportunity gulf that, by age 11, some children will never overcome. Surely, we should tackle that gulf, head on. The answer does not lie with helping children aged 11 or 16; it lies much earlier — before children even start school — and rests with parents by giving them the capacity and capabilities to support their children educationally. Research has shown that if we invest only £1 in the life of a child, we will make the most impact and gain the highest return by investing in his or her early years.

The ability gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children open up early — in the first few years of a child's life. With our early-years strategy and provision, we can begin to address and prevent disadvantage. There is no comfort for the Minister in the chief inspector's assessment of early-years provision, because it identifies clearly the variation in quality. Less than half of nursery provision is deemed to be "very good" or better, and, in the voluntary and private centres, it is just over one third. Indeed, that indicates a decline in overall effectiveness of the provision.

If the Minister really wants to make a difference to the equality of educational opportunity, she should address the provision and funding for early years. Where is the strategy for children aged nought to six, and why have we waited so long for its publication? It seems that early-years provision is not a priority for the Minister. She has failed to make early years either a policy priority or a funding priority.

The other crucial factor in improving educational outcomes for children is the involvement and support of parents. Research has demonstrated that parental involvement is the main factor in making a difference. A key indicator of success in further educational achievement, in particular, is that of parents providing children with early access to books, and reading to their children. One of the few mechanisms for supporting parents' involvement in education and their ability to be a co-educator for their children is extended schools. However, we have seen only the most minimal of such programmes, and the Minister appears to have given little or no priority to that in her Department's budget. She has cut the budget for extended schools, and the future of that programme remains uncertain.

In the recent literacy and numeracy strategy, mere lip service was paid to the involvement of parents in

one paragraph towards the end of the document; however, there was no real sense of commitment to ensure the capacity and capability of parents to support their children's education.

The chief inspector identifies that, in the most effective schools, parents are involved from the outset, they are given comprehensive information on their child's progress, and they are shown how to help through parental workshops.

Make no mistake — this is a scandal, and one in which the Minister plays no small part.

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

**Miss McIlveen:** She continually tells us that she is the Minister of Education. This report tells us that she is the Minister of failure.

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

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the publication of the Education and Training Inspectorate report, which is a necessary tool in identifying strengths and weaknesses across the education sector.

A number of issues are identified in the report, many of which are positive. Some of the issues raised are less positive and areas are identified for improvement. We must not lose focus on the chief inspector's statement that a majority of our children, young people and adult learners continue to achieve well and that there has been improvement over the past two years. That is not to be complacent; there are, without doubt, areas for improvement. However, we must put on record our recognition of the excellent work and standards of our teachers and principals in schools across the North, who ensure that all our children have the skills and education necessary for the future.

For too long, our education system has been focused on inequality. Therefore, it is no surprise that the chief inspector found that the biggest gap in educational attainment — especially in literacy and numeracy — is among those children from socially disadvantaged areas. I have a number of statistics that Michelle McIlveen quoted, and I will not repeat them.

It is time to focus on ensuring that all children receive the kind of education that provides them with the best start and the best skills that they need for life. That means that we must focus on primary-school years, because that is when we build the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, and ensure that children who fall behind are immediately given the help that they need. That is why the recent literacy and numeracy strategy focused on classroom teachers as a critical instrument in ensuring the engagement of children in learning and achieving the basic skills.

Making every school a good school is core to the Minister's agenda, and it is the only real mechanism to ensure that all children are given a fair chance of a decent education. The Minister supported the extended schools programme, which is essential in ensuring that children are supported beyond the classroom and are ready to learn when the school day begins. Through the provision of breakfast clubs, support with homework and activities at the end of the school day, the Minister has also ensured that children are best equipped to cope with the school environment.

Furthermore, the extended schools programme has been a vehicle for ensuring the involvement of parents, which is essential for children to succeed. Many parents, especially those from socially deprived backgrounds, may not have had a positive experience in school. In order to ensure that those parents do not pass that attitude on to their kids, the extended schools programme has been used by many schools to support parents to help their children and also to attract parents back into learning. That is why the Minister, despite budgetary restrictions, has continued to support the extended schools programme throughout her time as Minister of Education.

Undoubtedly, there is still much work to be done. The report identifies the issues that need to be addressed, which the Minister will take forward. Sinn Féin and the Minister are committed to making sure that we have the best education system for all our children, not just for the privileged few.

**Mr Poots:** Given that the Minister has been in her post for less than two years, it would be inappropriate to blame her for everything that is wrong with our education system. Nonetheless, there are things in the report that we need to learn from and take cognisance of. The Minister's actions until now do not provide great encouragement that a report in years to come will point to significant improvements that were made during her tenure.

Once again, a challenging issue in the report is the number of people who leave school without educational qualifications. That is a huge challenge for all of us. Unfortunately, the single focus of the Minister to address that problem has been on academic selection and transfer from primary school to secondary school, instead of where the problem starts. If people want to get to the nub of a problem, they need to go to where the problem starts — not halfway through the process.

The problems start with early-years funding and support. The report repeatedly highlights the benefits of nursery education and the quality of nursery schools. It also highlights the fact that nursery schools achieve higher standards than private-sector playgroups. However, in many areas across Northern Ireland, those nursery facilities do not exist. Why is the Minister so focused, concentrated and driven on the issue of

post-primary transfer but not focused, concentrated or driven on the provision of nursery education for our children?

We need our children to have the right start, and that is what the report states. It states that we are weak at the start of the education process, and as a consequence, we are weak at its conclusion.

2.45 pm

I challenge the Minister to use the findings of the report to get her house in order on education. Let us see that some good has come out of the time that she has happened to be the Minister of Education. That "some good" could be to ensure that in their very early years, our young people are resourced properly and adequately, with the right people and the right education system in place.

Raising education funding by 0.01% was a pathetic effort. That was done by moving the threshold from 1.04% to 1.05% for our primary schools for this year. I say to the Minister that that is not good enough. It is not satisfactory, and as a consequence, the reports that we will get on education and on this particular Minister in the future will read "fail".

**Mr B McCrea:** I sometimes wonder whether I am living in some kind of land of *déjà vu*. We keep having these discussions over and over again, yet nothing seems to change. The essence of what the Ulster Unionist Party has been trying to say about the education debate is that it is not about the 11-plus; it is about what happens at 11-minus and much earlier. It is about primary school, pre-primary school and nursery education.

The statistics in the chief inspector's report highlight certain challenges. When we look at those, we come back to the universal truth, which is that the single most important determining factor in our children's education is the quality of our teachers, particularly that of our school leaders.

I have tried everything to communicate with the Minister of Education. I have rationalised, pleaded, brought information to the table, and I have — occasionally — let my emotions get the better of me. However, none of those seem to cut it or to make any difference.

In bringing out salient information, if one wants to see what we have to do for the future, one has only to look across the water to Scotland, which has a fully comprehensive system. I borrowed a book from the Assembly Library called 'The Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland', which is a review of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report. It states that around 15% of primary 6 pupils were not reaching the agreed standard of reading at level C. That rose to 26% of

pupils in primary 7 and to 36% of pupils in secondary year one.

The book goes on to state the disparity of results in Glasgow, where there are multiple levels of deprivation. Those are precisely the areas where there are difficulties in reading, writing, scientific endeavour and so on. The lesson is clear: we will not be able to solve the issue without looking at the underlying causes of the problem. Those causes are social and economic deprivation, that is, multiple levels of deprivation. If you do not fix those issues, you will not fix anything else.

I say to the Minister as calmly and as reasonably as I can that we want to see change. We want to focus resources and attention on those schools that are struggling to meet some very real challenges. In that regard, the almost incessant chatter about the 11-plus is a red herring, because it is distracting us from the real job. If people really want to make a difference to the young people of Northern Ireland, and if they really want to see what can be done, the essence of the solution is to make every school a really good school.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Does the Member accept that while he and others have been chattering about the 11-plus, the Minister and the Department have moved on with a raft of changes to the education system that are focused solely on improving standards?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr B McCrea:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will use that extra minute to say that when I was talking about Members chattering, I was not talking just about people on this side of the House; I was talking about people on all sides of the Chamber. Nobody is getting to grips with the issue.

If one considers the matter, one realises that there is much to unite us. There is a common desire to improve the educational underachievement of many people in Northern Ireland, from whatever side. There is no sense in which one person is right and the other is wrong; there are lessons to be learned from all people, but those lessons must be learned. The issue comes down to the fact that we all want to find a way of concentrating resources, as the inspector pointed out, in the schools that need help — the schools that are challenged by really difficult social systems. It is no good for us up here to pontificate about that unless we are prepared to do something about it.

If the Minister were to come — and I have said this to her in the past — with a proposal to give more funding to primary schools, she would find some support. Had she said that for the long-term future of Northern Ireland we must invest more in nursery provision, I think that she would have received support. We must not allow ourselves to become involved in ideological

rants or to go down the road of rhetoric. We must try to find a way to work together on this matter.

There is no bigger test for the Assembly than to find a satisfactory solution to the education debate. It is not about politics; it is about people and all our children. Having put that message across, I hope that the Minister will consider the points that we have raised. The Ulster Unionist Party joins with others in asking the Minister to invest more in primary schools and in teachers. Please put our children before politics.

**Mrs M Bradley:** On reading the motion, my first thought was of the absolute shock felt by members of the Education Committee when we were furnished with the chief inspector's report. The statistics are worrying, to say the least, so it is up to us to instigate improvements for the future of pupils and of Northern Ireland.

Although the motion concentrates on primary schools, the results for post-primary schools must also be evaluated. There is little in the report of which to be proud. Despite the hard work of teachers, levels of quality, assessment and management hardly reach the dizzy heights. However, given the conditions and abuse through which some teachers must work, that is hardly surprising. Just two weeks ago, my colleague Dominic Bradley tabled a motion pertaining to violence against teachers. Some teachers face violence day and daily, and, therefore, we must not slaughter them for those results. However, we must tackle the system, one that is clearly not working.

The chief inspector has given us guidance on how to improve areas that are not up to scratch, but, in order to make those improvements, we need the means to do so. That is where the Minister can play her part. If that means that she reconsiders her budget allocations, then that must be done. Where there is need, we must attend to it.

One point in the report is particularly alarming. It states:

"Important issues highlighted in a survey report in May 2005 are still relevant. Only one-third of the primary schools have a clear focus on ICT to support teaching and learning in all classes across the curriculum. In addition, primary schools need to develop more systematic monitoring and evaluation of their ICT provision, and to continue to provide appropriate staff development."

The report must be considered well and acted upon, and that will require leadership, effort and money from the Department. Therefore, I implore the Minister to support schools, give them guidance and, more importantly, provide them with the funding that they require.

Parental involvement is in no sense a new matter. However, parents in my constituency are sometimes reluctant to become involved in the school community, or even to approach teachers about their child. In Australia, there is a long history of parental involvement in the classroom. Parents must take their

turn to take part in reading, play and exercise. I am fully aware that, in order to protect children, parents would have to be assessed and vetted, but the system works there, and, although it would take time to implement and to encourage parents to take part here, it is possible to achieve higher levels of literacy and numeracy and to create a more unified and welcoming education environment for all.

Education and stimulation in the early years are vital and highly recommended. However, a situation exists in which working parents have real difficulty finding places at preschool for their children because of the lack of places and the fact that the available places are already allocated to children whose parents receive benefits.

That situation lies at the door of the Education Minister, but it demands answers and assistance from many other Departments. After all, we are working towards one goal — a better and a shared future that starts at school and, for some, at preschool. A shared future is a shared responsibility. There must be action in order to achieve that, not words on paper that gathers dust on a shelf. We must not let down our children again. I support the motion.

**Ms Purvis:** I reviewed the chief inspector's recent report on the state of our schools with interest, as did the authors of the motion. The report's findings, which are outlined in the motion, are not great news. However, the report is not all doom and gloom; it also contains a number of positive findings. Others in the Chamber have fulfilled their role by delivering that information.

As regards the long-running debate over the great strengths and unjustifiable weaknesses of education in this country, there were no real surprises in the report for me. We have understood for years the value of early-years education and intervention that involves removing inequalities and giving children their best start in life. Yet we struggle to fully develop, deliver and fund that provision, even in our most deprived areas.

We have known for decades that our primary schools are under-resourced and that that is based on an historical legacy of social condescension — elementary schools were for the masses, and not much was expected of the masses. Nonetheless, we continue to fund our primary schools at the lowest per-pupil level in the UK. It has been known for centuries that children who cannot read and write become adults who are more likely to be economically inactive. In modern society, failings in literacy and numeracy are penalties for life, yet we fail to set and to meet appropriate standards in those subjects for all our children and young adults.

Those are ongoing and serious challenges that require immediate and appropriate attention, but they are not news. The real feature of the report was the

chief inspector's commentary, in which the findings were put in context. In that commentary, he offers direction for those in the Chamber with the responsibility for creating, scrutinising and supporting policy that affects education. He states:

“We must focus our efforts clearly on reducing the gap between those who currently benefit most from our overall education system and those whose educational achievements are constrained by the poverty of social deprivation, of low aspirations, and, increasingly, the challenges of coping with modern society.”

That goal is at the heart of my party's education policies, and I believe that the policy objectives outlined in the motion are the correct means of moving towards that aim. Only by delivering comprehensive early-years provision, fully-funded and resourced primary education, greater support for parental involvement, and a firm focus on high standards in literacy and numeracy will we start to reduce the massive gaps in our education system and, therefore, in our society.

It is also refreshing to see the DUP taking an interest in all primary students and not just those who are on their way to grammar school. We have challenged our primary schools not only with educational attainment, but also with major critical pastoral-care issues, which they have admirably taken on.

Primary schools in east Belfast face particular challenges. Of the 20 most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, 14 are in Belfast, and four of those wards are in inner east Belfast. Those four wards are among 10% of the most deprived areas. Primary schools in those areas face difficulties well beyond the three Rs. Most teachers and principals in those schools embrace the additional responsibilities that come with delivering pastoral and social care as well as education. However, they are in dire need of real, flexible funding that will allow them to meet the changing demands on their schools.

The Minister of Education has delivered several principled statements in the Chamber about where she sees the Northern Ireland education system heading. I support a number of the principles that she has outlined in relation to removing inequalities and creating a system in which all children are selected for something, rather than just academically.

However, the Minister is failing to turn those principles into clear policies that can be implemented. I recognise that there are obstacles to turning the policy objectives of the motion into reality, but I believe that those objectives offer a workable framework that she should consider. I support the motion.

3.00 pm

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate, and I am pleased to speak to Members about quality

and standards in the education system. The wide-ranging nature of the motion highlights the complex issues. There are no simple solutions, but that is not an excuse for inaction. Today, I will set out for Members my approach to ensuring that every schoolchild is supported in reaching her or his potential.

Mar Aire Oideachais, ba ar na páistí a bhí an fócas agam ariamh. Éiríonn go maith le roinnt páistí, agus is ceart agus cóir sin a cheiliúradh. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo inniu, mar is léir go bhfuil Comhaltáí ó gach páirtí ag glacadh leis faoi dheireadh go bhfuil páistí eile ann nach mbaineann na caighdeáin is airde amach.

As the Minister of Education, my focus has always been on children. Some children are high achievers, and we are right to celebrate that. Members from all parties are beginning to realise that other children do not achieve the highest standards. I welcome their realisation because, as Members will remember, when I took up my post as Minister, some parties were focusing almost exclusively on the so-called “world-class” education system and were paying little, or no, attention to the lack of standards or to underachieving children. I am pleased that the Assembly is moving in the right direction. I am glad that the message has been heard, and I look forward to working with all parties to deliver the far-reaching programme of reform that is under way and is specifically designed to address the issues that have been raised today, and those that affect children from all communities.

We have much to be proud of, as our system provides top-end qualifications to the most able pupils. However, it must also be recognised that many more children leave school with inadequate educational achievements. The chief inspector's report highlights the good or excellent work in schools and the improvements that have been made. There is much good practice that should be acknowledged, celebrated and shared.

However, the report also sends out a clear message that more must be done to raise standards. It identifies areas in which educational provision is simply not good enough. I am committed to equality, and that inequality of provision must be addressed. The Assembly must ensure that all pupils, regardless of where they live, background, gender, disability, race or sexual orientation, are given the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Subsequently, all children, not only a privileged few, will be able to develop their skills, knowledge and self-confidence, and they will help to build a fairer, better and more equal society.

The chief inspector's report makes it clear that now is the time for strong leadership. He rightly values leadership in schools for the vital contribution that it makes to educational excellence. Political leadership is

equally important. Let us be clear that leadership is not simply about being popular; it is about being strong, making tough decisions and standing up to be counted.

No matter how hard it may seem at the time, leadership is a matter of setting a process on the right track to improve a particular situation. Leadership is about remembering that, at the heart of every difficult decision are the children sitting in the classrooms, and they have only one chance to pass through the education system. For them, I will do what I think is right, whether or not that is easy. I invite all political parties to join me in facing the challenge of showing leadership for the benefit of every child in the school system, because they all deserve that.

The report of the chief inspector, Stanley Goudie, helps to chart where leadership must be shown, and I met him to discuss the detail of the report and his recommendations. I also asked for copies to be made available to all schools and their boards of governors. The permanent secretary of my Department wrote to every principal and the chairperson of every board of governors to highlight the report and the need to take action now.

The importance of raising standards for every pupil and making every school a good school underpins all the issues. Indeed, ‘Every School a Good School’ is the title of the new school improvement policy that I will publish shortly.

Teachers and young people helped to shape our school improvement policy by telling us what drives improvement and what characterises a good school. A key message is that every school should be striving to improve learning and teaching. The Department will set policy, but schools, through self-evaluation, will lead improvement at every level. They will need appropriate support and challenge, and, for that to be effective, we must undertake a reform programme to help schools to raise standards for our children.

Má tá an beartas um fheabhsú scoileanna le bheith iomlán éifeachtach, caithfidh sé teacht leis an chlár leathan leasuithe: leasuithe a thosaíonn sna luathbhlianta sula dtéann páistí ar an mbunscoil; leasuithe ar an gcuraclam; agus leasuithe ar oideachas múinteoirí agus ar riachtanais speisialta agus cuimsiú.

In order to be fully effective, the new school improvement policy must be complemented by that wider reform programme: reforms that begin in the early years before children enter primary schools, reforms of the curriculum, of teacher education, of special needs and inclusion, and reforms that affect how children move from primary school, including transfer 2010.

Some parties choose to ignore the whole area of selection and the effects that it has on underachievement. If those parties continue to read and research into the

causes of underachievement, they will see the gaps that open up at P5, P6 and P7. While some of our children are being taught to a test, and others are sitting at the back of the classroom doing time fillers, children in the rest of Ireland, children in England, Scotland and Wales, and children throughout the world, are learning a broader, much more interesting curriculum. We ignore the link between selection and underachievement at our peril, because the children will suffer the disadvantage by parties continuing to ignore that.

Let us begin at the beginning. A child's early years are vital for development and well-being. The foundations for success are laid in those early years before a child gets to primary school. We must support our children at the beginning of their educational journey, a journey that starts at birth.

The influence of parents can be the single most important factor in a child's ability to access learning successfully. We have programmes in place to support parents as they fulfil their vital role — programmes such as Sure Start, which help to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of preschool children, particularly those from disadvantaged areas. I have visited many Sure Start programmes, including one in Mount Vernon, and, last Friday, I visited a very good Sure Start programme in Downpatrick. We also have the home childcare approval scheme and the early years development fund. Those help to provide a good foundation for children's future learning, as does the preschool education expansion programme, which provides one year of high-quality preschool education for every child whose parents wish it.

Those programmes show our commitment to setting children on the path to age-appropriate learning before they even start school. The importance of early years is why my Department is developing a strategy for that important time in a child's life. The early years strategy will ensure a smooth transition from the home, through preschool settings, to primary school. It will ensure that a solid framework is in place for early childhood to prepare children for life at school and beyond. In order to build on a good start, children need the best possible transition to formal schooling. We have introduced the foundation stage curriculum for years one and two to help to develop confident children who are engaged in learning. The curriculum stage provides a curriculum suitable for our youngest pupils, with the focus on developing the literacy and numeracy skills that they need for a successful future.

I have secured £32 million over three years to support the foundation stage curriculum. That means that, for the first time, all pupils in years one and two have access to classroom assistants. In addition, we are in the process of initiating a fundamental, comprehensive review of the common funding formula, and I welcome Members' comments from all sides of the House that

they want to see money going in on the basis of need and inequality and getting into the most disadvantaged areas. I can assure Members that the comprehensive review will ensure that we get money into our primary schools.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Education:** No, I will not give way. The Member has had his opportunity.

In relation to extended schools, we have recognised the key role of parents in their children's education. Parents are the first educators and should be part of a partnership to support their children. Extended schools are already building those partnerships: parents are supported to value education, encourage their children and provide stimulating learning experiences. That helps children develop self-confidence and the will to succeed, within a loving and caring home environment. The extended-schools programme is central to that important educational area.

I have written to the Minister of Finance, and I very much look forward to his support for the additional money that I need for extended schools. I welcome the support of everyone in the House to ensure that my Department receives that needed money. I have that money for the following year, as I have mainstreamed it into my budget, but I very much look forward to the Minister of Finance supporting me in that important work.

I turn now to special educational needs and the inclusion review, and in doing so I must join with my colleague John O'Dowd. I have brought my review to every Executive colleague, and I have received comments from every Executive colleague except one. However, to date, there has been a refusal by one party to put that review on the agenda. Although I welcome the comments that I have heard in the Chamber today, I very much look forward to the review of special needs and inclusion being placed on the agenda —

**Mr Storey:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Education:** I will not give way.

I want a review of special educational needs and inclusion and £25 million on top of the £188 million. I want that on the agenda, and that is where people's priorities must lie, rather than the attempts to block it that we have had in the past. Hopefully, we are now living in new times and we will not continue with that. If we can quickly identify a child who is having difficulties or struggling, early interventions can be put in place to support that child.

Leagtar amach moltaí san athbhreithniú ar riachtanais speisialta agus cuimsiú do chreatlach tacaíochta a bheas níos láidre agus níos cuntasáí agus a thabharfaidh aghaidh ar riachtanais gach páiste a luaithe is féidir, cibé céim oideachais ag a bhfuil siad.

The review of special educational needs and inclusion sets out proposals for a more robust and accountable support framework addressing the needs of all children as early as possible, whatever their stage of education. I have secured £25 million in support of that review, and I very much look forward to moving forward.

As I have said, the transfer test has had a damaging and distorting effect on our primary curriculum and on our children. For those who opted into the test, preparation narrowed much of primary 6 and 7, whereas those who opted out of the test were often marginalised. I am delighted that the distortions of the transfer test are behind us. That — along with the transfer 2010 guidance — will help to address inequalities in the system. I hope that all schools will adhere to that guidance. I especially hope that grammar schools will choose not to practice academic selection and will choose the pathway of equality rather than the pathway of inequality. Transfer 2010 is an opportunity for all grammar schools to make their excellent provision available in a fair manner, for the first time.

Trí aistriú 2010 beidh bunscoileanna agus iarbhunscoileanna araon ábalta díriú ar a bpríomhthasc: torthaí a fheabhsú. The literacy and numeracy strategy aims to raise standards for all young people and reduce the gaps in achievement between the least and most disadvantaged. It is based on existing good practice in our schools.

Delivering on all those reforms relies on education professionals. Yesterday, I attended a very good seminar at the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, along with inspectors such as Stanley Goudie and other inspectors from England, Scotland, Wales and across the island of Ireland. Leadership and the raising of standards, which play a vital role in our schools, were some of the key areas that were addressed.

Recognising the importance of teacher training and leadership development means that we must deliver them as efficiently and effectively as possible. To that end, the education and skills authority, which is due to be established in January 2010, will have a clear duty to promote high standards. Establishing ESA will make better use of available funds, and that is equally important when considering school funding.

We heard the usual rants and prejudice against the Irish language.

**Some Members:** Time. The Minister's time is up.

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

3.15 pm

**The Minister of Education:** I pay tribute to the Irish-medium sector. I have spoken to representatives of all the Irish-medium schools and representatives of the education and skills authority. They are studying the positive findings of the report and the areas in which

there is need for improvement. To quote selectively is not the way forward.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I welcome the chief inspector's report, and I look forward to working with Stanley Goudie and his team in the weeks and months ahead.

**Mr McCausland:** I am glad to say that there was support from every part of the Chamber for the motion that was tabled by the DUP members of the Committee for Education. That is an acknowledgement of the importance of the issue that we have been discussing.

Mervyn Storey moved the motion by reiterating the point that has been made many times by folk from this side of the Chamber: the Minister constantly links together selection and underachievement. True to type, she did that in the latter part of her contribution today. The failure is not in that regard, but I will return to that subject later in my speech. The issue in respect of the Minister's funding is about policies, practices and priorities. Mr Storey identified those three points. The Minister has the wrong priorities, and, often, the wrong focus.

Differences in educational achievement arise long before assessment at the age of 11. Differences and disadvantages are evident at the age of three. Therefore, there is a need for greater investment in preschool provision, and the benefits that accrue from that will be obvious. Underachievement is not as widespread as is sometimes suggested, but it needs to be addressed as a priority.

John O'Dowd defended Sinn Féin policy, and informed the House that all the Minister's policies are about improving standards — however, he was not convincing. Subsequently, he launched into a bizarre and incomprehensible comment on religious fundamentalism, which baffled folk on this side of the Chamber.

Ken Robinson reminded us of the recommendations that were identified in the Audit Office's 2006 report, 'Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools'. The content of the Education and Training Inspectorate's report is not new; it has been identified already. Ken Robinson spoke also of the plethora of departmental reviews, and he said that the Education and Training Inspectorate's report brings a breath of reality to the situation. I am glad to say that Ken Robinson talked about social factors, such as the lack of role models for boys in schools, the subsequent importance of having more male teachers, and the difficulties that are being faced by young teachers in seeking full-time employment. It is important to emphasise the relationship between social factors and underachievement in education.

Ken Robinson described the ESA as a wonder horse, and, once again, the Minister proved true to form by reminding the House that the ESA would be the answer to all our woes.

Dominic Bradley said that we cannot be complacent and that the recommendations of the report should be implemented. He also reminded us that substantial investment has been made in numeracy and literacy, but that the problem remains. He spoke about the need for strong leadership in our schools. In an intervention during Dominic Bradley's speech, Ken Robinson said that too many demands and burdens were being placed on school principals, who are not principals, but they are teachers, administrators and social workers — they have to fulfil a plethora of roles. There was agreement on that intervention.

Trevor Lunn commented on the comparative underfunding of primary schools, and that has been identified in the motion. Money can be spent on the later stages of education, but a better return will be achieved if investment is made in the early stages. We want to convey to the Minister that the funding of early-years provision, preschool and the early years of primary school should receive priority.

**Mr McCarthy:** Does the Member agree that it would be beneficial if the Minister were to ring-fence the funding for early-years provision? If she did that, the people who provide it would not be surviving hand to mouth. They cannot plan without ring-fenced funding.

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Member for his intervention. There is agreement that greater weighting in respect of funding should be given to early-years provision and that the money must be invested there.

Michelle McIlveen spoke about the need to value our primary-school teachers. We can have all the necessary resources — school buildings, and so forth — but we will not get anywhere if we do not have good teachers.

It is important that we value teachers, affirm the work that they do, recognise the difficult circumstances in which they work, and give them all the support that they need. That is where the issue of funding comes in, particularly at that early stage, as it is important to ensure that classes are small and that the pupil-teacher ratio is appropriate.

Miss McIlveen reminded us that one fifth of children leave primary school with a low level of literacy and numeracy, and she quoted a range of figures — which I will not repeat — that highlighted the differential between some of the more disadvantaged areas and other areas. She referred to the need to support parents so that they can support their children. That point was picked up by others at a later stage, and I know that Mary Bradley also brought the role of parents to our attention.

The highest return can be got by investing at an early stage; therefore, the early-years strategy is important. Why are we waiting for that strategy? No policy, no priority — that is the indictment on the Minister.

Michelle O'Neill said that the report shows that a majority continue to achieve well but that we must not be complacent. She also commented on extended schools; however, the problem is that the Minister did not prioritise the extended schools scheme. Mrs O'Neill also referred to the opportunity to engage with parents, which is a point that a number of contributors commented on.

Edwin Poots said that the Minister has been in her post for fewer than two years — it merely seems like a lifetime. Children leaving school without qualifications is an issue, but we need to go to where the problem starts, rather than dealing with it halfway through the education system. That brings us back to the need for good nursery- and primary-level provision. The increase in primary funding that has been obtained so far has been negligible, and that is not good enough.

Basil McCrea said that the issue is not about the 11-plus; it is about what happens at 11-minus. He quoted from a book but did not get removed from the Chamber — I must learn from him how to do that, because I have not quite worked that out yet.

**Mr B McCrea:** It depends on the book.

**Mr McCausland:** Yes; it is probably a question of what book one reads.

Mary Bradley said that she was shocked at the Enterprise, Trade and Investment report. The inspectorate has given guidance on improvement, and that is good. We are glad that that guidance is there; the Minister must now take note of it. Mrs Bradley said that the Minister may need to review financial allocations and effectively reprioritise, and she also spoke of the potential role for parents in schools. When she was speaking, it occurred to me that we are told “every school a good school”, but we are talking about every child a good start. Every child must get a good start — that is, a good foundation that will take them right through the education system.

Dawn Purvis spoke of a number of positives in the report; however, she also referred to the historic underfunding of primary schools and the low levels of aspiration, which is an important issue. We need to help children to develop a good level of aspiration and help them to be ambitious so that they can have a good future. She said there was a need for comprehensive early-years provision, and she referred also to pastoral and social care, as well as basic education.

The Minister then spoke and said a number of things that I found interesting. She welcomed the fact that members of all parties are “beginning” to realise that there is an issue of underachievement. That comment was patronising, offensive and erroneous, because those of us on this side of the Chamber who work in communities that have suffered from underachievement for a considerable time have been identifying and

pursuing that issue and have sought to have it addressed. We have done that through such means as our membership of education and library boards, working on schools' boards of governors, working in communities with schools, or working as members of the Committee for Education here. I found the comment thoroughly offensive and inappropriate.

**Mr B McCrea:** Does the Member agree that the Minister seemed to suggest that she was the only person who ever visited any school in the Shankill or in any other area? Will he take this opportunity to say that all of us in this Chamber visit all those schools?

**Mr McCausland:** In fact, some of us were working on the Shankill Road at a time when her associates were bombing the Shankill.

The Minister said that leadership is not about being popular — my colleague Mervyn Storey said that on that basis, she must be the most effective leader in the world.

**Mr McLaughlin:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Speaker rule on whether that comment by Mr McCausland contravenes the Speaker's earlier ruling about such comments?

**Mr Speaker:** I will review the Hansard report and come back to the Member directly, or to the House.

**Mr McCausland:** I remind the Member that there has long been an association in the past — and I was referring to the past. There has been an association over many years between political republicanism and militant military republicanism. The position is clear, and I made it clear. I said "over years". There seems to be a sensitivity — a deep sensitivity — in some quarters.

The Minister reverted to type and blamed selection as one of the key problems.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Mr McCausland:** She said that ESA would be the answer to all our woes. Many of us remain to be convinced — I think that she has other convincing to do.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes the findings in the recent report from the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate that in primary schools the overall quality of provision was not good enough in one third of schools; that standards attained were not good enough in one quarter; that there was too significant a variation in the standards of literacy and numeracy attained; that the quality of teaching was in need of improvement in one lesson in every five; that the quality of planning was inadequate in one school in every ten; and that the quality of principals' leadership is an area for improvement in one quarter of schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to place greater focus in early years and primary education, including the low level of funding and the pupil-teacher ratio, encouraging greater parental involvement and placing a greater emphasis on early intervention and numeracy and literacy.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion 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 Lunn:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that schools may choose to use an examination as part of their entry criteria under the Minister of Education's 2010 guidelines; calls on the Minister of Education to re-commission the CCEA test, she abandoned on 2 February 2009, that schools may then use for a maximum of two years; and calls on the Executive to agree new, legally binding guidelines for post-primary transfer for use from 2011.

I am pleased that we now have an opportunity to return to this matter, which is, without doubt, the most vexing within the education debate. Indeed, of all the current issues before the Assembly, it is one of the most important.

I do not want to review in detail the history of how we got to where we are today, but I will make a few points. For the Alliance Party to recommend a system of academic selection, even on a temporary basis, is a major shift in its thinking — I nearly said "shame". I emphasise that our basic long-term approach is unaltered. Our commitment to end selection at age 11 is solid, as is our preference for age 14, à la Dickson plan, as the age at which educational choices are made.

The Alliance Party wishes to raise the standards of secondary schools to such a level that parents will opt for them by first choice and not as second best. We have no desire to lower the standards or destroy the ethos of any school. Indeed, it would be completely counterproductive to raise one standard at the expense of another.

**Mr Kennedy:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lunn:** No, not yet. Let me get into my stride. Come back in an hour.

We are offering a short-term fix to allow all parties — political or otherwise — to reconsider the way forward. In particular, we are asking the Minister to revisit, in an amended form, the compromise arrangements that she offered last year: a CCEA-formulated test based on the literacy and numeracy components of the revised curriculum, to be available as a standard test to all schools and all pupils.

That initiative has wide support from educationalists: they are not unanimous, but it has wide support. We have consulted widely, and it is fair to say that even those who do not agree have at least acknowledged the fact that we are trying to do something to avoid the looming confrontation caused by the Minister's current refusal to compromise and the threat of independent action by the grammar-school lobby, aided, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by her political opponents.

I believe that if the Minister can be persuaded to run with our proposals, the problems she had with her previous compromise offer, over the legislative basis for the application of a test and the necessary conditions to be attached, could be overcome. No doubt, the Chairman of the Committee will refer to that when he rises to speak shortly. It must be clear that no legal basis is required to commission the test: the legal basis is required to apply the test. The Minister could give the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) the go-ahead this afternoon to complete the work, which, I believe, was largely completed anyway when she last asked it to do the same thing. Given that the Education Committee has also asked for a compromise very close to ours, it is hard to imagine how it could oppose this. Equally, one would think that, in the circumstances, the Executive would not block the issue either — but who knows.

We are reminded constantly that it is all about the children. I am speaking on their behalf in appealing for common sense to prevail.

3.30 pm

I have been asked whether the Alliance Party would be content for grammar schools to use the test to provide 100% of their intake. The SDLP amendment makes specific reference to that question. We do not wish that situation to develop any more than the SDLP does, so we are suggesting a combination of the test results and the best of the Minister's guidelines to provide a balanced intake to all schools, including grammar schools.

We do not wish to be prescriptive about the criteria to be applied; that is a matter for further discussion when framing the legislative basis for setting the criteria. For that reason, although we recognise the merits of the SDLP amendment, we want to keep the terms of our motion simple. Therefore, we will not support the amendment.

We find ourselves in a strange position. If the House had accepted the Minister's 50%, 30%, 20% proposals some months ago, or if the Minister would now accept our proposals or the suggestions of the Committee for Education — which are practically the same — we could make progress. Two offers of compromise have been made at different times, but those, apparently, are

unacceptable. Currently, however, we are considering the departmental guidelines — or our compromise — as the way forward.

The Alliance Party could work with the guidelines, but it is abundantly clear that others cannot. The question is whether the guidelines are enforceable. Legally, they probably are, but are we prepared to countenance enforcement actions against schools or head teachers who allow preparation time for grammar-school tests or allow their premises to be used in a way that contravenes those guidelines? Will we really take legal action? What sanctions will we apply against those head teachers? Will we cane them? Will we affect their funding in some way? The situation is ludicrous and unnecessary.

Are teachers expected to defy the advice of their unions and suffer the wrath of parents who want their children to be prepared for, perhaps, several different tests? Do we really want all that pressure to be heaped on 10-year-olds? Do the Association for Quality Education and other groups want to go down an unregulated road that is strewn with legal minefields? I do not think so; we do not need to do that.

The motion, if accepted by the Minister, will resolve the confusion for parents, pupils and teachers, and it will provide the Assembly with two further years to deliver democratic consensus. There is a feeling that that just cannot be done, but there are plenty of things around this place that people said could not be done. People are sitting in Government together who were — as they keep reminding us, no less so today — sworn enemies just a few years ago, and they are reaching agreement. Sometimes they sulk for a few months, but they get back to business. Things are being done that would have been unheard of a few years ago, so this issue can also be resolved.

We think that we have the support of large sections of the educational establishment, including the Churches, headmasters, the general public and the Transferor Representatives' Council. The SDLP amendment also refers to a group of educators to try to find a way through this situation, which could be helpful. In fact, that is probably inevitable. However, it is the Department that eventually has to make the decisions, which is why I am appealing to the Minister. I do not think that I am breaking any confidence by stating that I believe that the Catholic bishops will also broadly support what we are doing.

Today, for varying reasons, I believe that we will receive the support of most of the parties that are represented here. I am under no illusions: different agendas, ambitions and endgames are involved. However, I do not care. If we are prepared to put our core principles on hold for the greater good, it is reasonable to ask the rest of the parties to do the same.

It is fair enough if they have different agendas, but we can co-operate for the next two years and try to bring some order to the situation — otherwise, confusion and unacceptable pressure will be placed on our primary 5 and primary 6 children.

To reject the motion is to reject the only route away from chaos. Everyone involved with education, which means pretty much our entire population, will be watching carefully to see how we deal with the situation. Minister, it is over to you — join with us. The Minister is often quoted as saying that it is all about the children. It is time for her to prove that she means that. I ask her to support the motion.

**Mr D Bradley:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “2010 guidelines” and insert

“; calls on the Minister of Education to ensure the provision of a CCEA test, as she previously proposed, for a maximum period of two years; believes that no school should be allowed to admit its full year 8 pupil quota using the outcomes of that test alone or using any other test; recommends the admission criteria as outlined in the Minister’s statement on transfer 2010 on 2 February 2009 and welcomes the first criterion as a means of ensuring that all schools help tackle social deprivation; and further calls on the Minister of Education to set up a new educator-led working group tasked with building a sustainable consensus on non-selective transfer whose recommendations the Executive and the Assembly would use as the basis for legally binding regulations from 2011 at the latest.”

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an leasú don rún a mholadh. The SDLP’s position on post-primary transfer is, and has always been, unambiguous. Since the party’s foundation, its members have campaigned for the abolition of the 11-plus. We believe it to be academically unsound and socially unjust. We welcome the fact that it has been confined to the dustbin of history. However, we cannot stand by and tolerate a situation whereby eight years after the 11-plus was abolished, we are less than eight months away from chaos and anarchy in the education system.

The SDLP is not afraid to show leadership on the issue. We have listened to what people have said, and we will continue to engage. At this stage, we are all aware of the public uncertainty about the transfer issue. We cannot afford to ignore that. It behoves us all to do everything within our power to ensure that parents, pupils and teachers have clarity on the issue. It is for that reason that our party has tabled the amendment.

The 2006-08 report by the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate, which we debated earlier today, echoes the public’s views when it states:

“The uncertainty about the practical implications of DE’s outlined proposals for the review of post-primary education remains a concern for individual schools, parents and pupils.”

To my mind, the Alliance Party’s motion is somewhat unclear about whether it seeks to support the original proposed use of the CCEA test. To some extent, Trevor Lunn has clarified that in his speech. We were unsure

whether the motion supports the use of the test to admit a percentage of pupils — a different percentage each year — with all children in year 3 being admitted by application of admission criteria only, or whether it supports the use of tests to select 100% of the intake for grammar schools. Trevor now confirms that it supports the former, so I do not know why he cannot support our amendment.

Not only that, it was unclear whether the Alliance Party’s motion precluded the use of other tests, and we have clarified that in our amendment. Moreover, the motion does not point towards the future. Given those ambiguities, it was difficult for us to support the motion, which is why we tabled the amendment. I appeal to the Alliance Party to join us in supporting the amendment, because, as Trevor outlined, they are largely in agreement with major parts of our amendment.

The clear consensus is that an unregulated system is not desirable and that an interim regulated system is needed. The SDLP amendment offers that regulation as a short-term solution, pending agreement on a longer-term outcome. Our party’s amendment supports the continuation of such a regulated system for two years, but a system that is not solely dependent on a test.

As outlined in our policy, our party members would prefer that transfer take place without the use of test. However, given the exceptional prevailing circumstances, we believe that the partial use of the CCEA test is preferable to the use of an unlimited number of other tests in an unregulated system.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am interested to hear the Member outline what is now, presumably, SDLP policy. Has that policy been explained to the largely middle-class parents of Our Lady’s Grammar School, Sacred Heart Grammar School, Abbey Christian Brothers’ Grammar School and St Colman’s College in Newry? Those parents do not support the policy that has just been outlined.

**Mr D Bradley:** I doubt whether those parents, whose views Mr Kennedy seems to know so intimately, vote for his party: they are more likely to be supporters of our party.

We know from the chief inspector’s report — which was debated earlier today — that many post-primary schools, particularly in the non-selective sector, are continuing to feel the effects of demographic decline. Enrolment figures have dropped by almost 4,000, and more than one third of schools have fewer than 500 pupils, which is potentially disastrous. Demographic decline is going to worsen over the next few years, which will lead to unplanned outcomes in the form of school closures in some areas. We need to act now before that situation occurs.

The arrangements for Key Stage 4 pupils must be fully in place by 2013 to ensure that schools can

deliver the range of choice needed to fulfil the requirements of the entitlement framework. Area-based planning needs to continue in order to ensure that each area has an opportunity to shape its future educational provision. That does not mean a one-size-fits-all solution or one that is imposed on local areas from on high; it means a solution that best suits local circumstances, whether in Newry, which Mr Kennedy mentioned, Omagh, Derry, Lisburn, Enniskillen or anywhere else.

The chief inspector put his finger on one important aspect of the public pulse on this issue, namely the uncertainty about the practical implication of the Department's proposals. People want to know what the outworking of those proposals will be for their local area, and it is only through the area-based planning process that they will see what those local outcomes will be. That is why it is so important for the process to continue and for local plans to be agreed in each sector and between the various sectors.

We can build parental confidence by telling parents what their local schools will be, how those schools will co-operate and collaborate and how their children will access those schools. In addition to the immediate problem of transfer in 2010, there is lack of knowledge and information about how education will be delivered in each local area in the years that will follow, which is compounding the existing uncertainty.

If parents are to have a degree of confidence in the system, they need to know the results of area-based planning and be able to see — in the words of the chief inspector — what “practical implications” the Department's proposals will have for children in their local area. The SDLP believes, and proposes in the amendment, that an educator-led working group will be well placed to find sustainable consensus that will lead to a permanent solution for the future. That proposal and, indeed, all the main aspects of the amendment, have support in the wider educational community, and that will be confirmed in the future.

There is no doubt that we need change in our education system in order to meet the demands of the global economy, particularly during the economic downturn. We need change in order to address the shortcomings so clearly outlined during the debate on the chief inspector's report. We need change to tackle the long tail of underachievement and the large number of pupils who leave our schools without proper qualifications. We need to bring certainty to pupils, parents, teachers and schools, and the proposals in our amendment will help to do that. I commend the amendment to the House and ask Members to support it. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

3.45 pm

**Mr Storey:** I rise to speak as Chairperson of the Committee for Education. The debate is timely for two reasons: it provides an opportunity for the Committee to put on record its position on the unregulated system of transfer that is before us and, more importantly, it provides Members of the House with a last-minute opportunity to give a clear and unequivocal message to the Minister of Education so that primary-6 pupils, parents and teachers are not subjected to further unnecessary uncertainty and stress.

Immediately after the Minister of Education's statement to the House on 2 February 2009 on the transfer 2010 guidance, the Committee requested that she come to a meeting of the Committee as soon as possible to discuss her proposed guidance. Having received no reply, the Committee discussed a widespread and growing concern about an unregulated transfer system at its meeting on 18 February, and agreed to write to the Minister. The Committee's letter of 20 February to the Minister — and a follow-up letter of 2 March, written after the Committee had received confirmation that the Minister was prepared to appear before it — made crystal clear the extent of the Committee's concern about an unregulated transfer system. There was a consensus within the Committee that that was the least desirable outcome for children, parents and schools. Both letters are available on the Committee's website, under the heading “Committee Responses”.

Those letters are important and are central to today's motion because they set out the Committee's proposal to the Minister to reconsider the use of her own CCEA test as an interim compromise arrangement. The letter provided evidence of widespread concerns over an unregulated system, and asked the Minister for full and urgent consideration of the core principle of using a regulated test for an interim period, which would not distort the primary curriculum. I stress to Members that no other conditions were attached to the Committee's proposal. Clearly, the detail of an interim solution required further work.

However, just 30 minutes before the Committee met the Minister of Education on 10 March, the Committee received the Minister's briefing note for the meeting. At the second bullet point, it stated:

“I will not agree to the Committee's request.”

The note went on to say that the CCEA test had been cancelled, and that it was commissioned as a contingency measure. After nearly two hours of robust discussion, as Chairperson of the Committee, I asked the Minister of Education whether she would allow the Committee to flesh out proposals. I also put to her a final question. The Hansard report shows that all parties represented on the Committee stated their

positions on the Committee's proposal. My question was as follows:

"Is it your intention to reflect on those considerations, or are you telling the Committee that you will not consider its request as outlined in the letter of 20 February?"

The Minister's answer is all important to today's debate:

"I always reflect on everything that the Committee says to me. I have been clear about Transfer 2010 — it is the Department's policy. There will not be a CCEA test. We have to move forward now under Transfer 2010 in the interests of all our children."

As Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I shall end by listing the evidence of concerns about an unregulated system, which we put to the Minister in the Committee's letter of 20 February. Those are —

**Mr O'Dowd:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am deeply concerned that the views of the Education Committee are not being fairly reflected by the Chairperson in this debate. I ask you to examine the Member's speech because it does not reflect the Education Committee's stated position. No position has been agreed by the Education Committee on this matter.

**Mr Speaker:** I certainly did not call the Member as Chairperson of the Committee.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member has consistently referred to himself as Chairperson of the Education Committee. He is speaking as Chairperson of the Education Committee, and I contend that his remarks do not reflect the agreed position of the Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** I will look at the Hansard report, and I will come back to the Member directly, or to the House. To clarify that point: from the Chair's point of view, I certainly did not call him as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. He may have reflected that himself as a Member.

**Mr Storey:** Thank you, Mr Speaker; I made it abundantly clear. It seems as though some Members have difficulty with their hearing. I am speaking as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. The Member is quite entitled to raise his concerns. If he is questioning the accuracy of the Hansard report, the accuracy of the letter that was sent to the Minister of Education — and the Member was present when that letter was approved — or if he has a difficulty with his own intelligence, that is his problem not mine.

**Mr O'Dowd:** On a point of order. The Member has just confirmed that he is speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Education. There is no agreed position from the Education Committee in relation to this matter. There is no agreed statement from the Education Committee on this matter. I maintain that the position that is being given by the Member is inaccurate.

**Mr Speaker:** As I said to the Member earlier, let me look at the Hansard report and I will come back to you directly, or to the House.

**Mr Storey:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Obviously this is an issue that has caused grave concern — and I speak now not as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, but as a Member. However, obviously, I am glad that the Minister —

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr Storey:** I am just glad that the Minister of Education finds this issue so funny. Well, it is not funny whenever she has —

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

**Mr Storey:** Well, I will say this, Mr Speaker: it is not funny for the Minister of Education, who allows a situation to develop —

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Storey:** The Minister said that she will not continue with academic selection. We will see by the end of this week, when other statements are made, as to whether that is still her stated position.

**Mr Speaker:** I must insist that the Member takes his seat.

**Mr D Bradley:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Storey has confirmed that he was speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Education. I would like to place on record that in the letter of 20 February, from the Committee to the Minister on the issue of CCEA tests, I expressed the reservations that our party has on that issue. I said that we feared that it would become a permanent fixture, and I reiterated that point at the Education Committee's meeting on 10 March. I just want to record our party's stance on that issue.

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. I have said so many times in the House that I would prefer it if Committee business was not discussed on the Floor of the Chamber. I have made that absolutely clear on many occasions. Whatever happens within a Committee should stay within a Committee. It should not come onto the Floor of this Assembly for any debate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i gcoinne an ruin agus an leasaithe. I am against the motion and the proposed amendment. It is worth noting that among the letters to the Minister — which have been so referred to in the debate — was a letter from a principal in Lisburn, speaking against academic selection, upon which the Chairperson of the Committee for Education failed to reflect.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** No, I will not give way.

Is there an agreed position in the House on the unregulated system, I wonder? I have taken a leaf out of Mr McCausland's book and delved deep into the libraries of this institution, into the dusty alcoves, and found many an interesting speech, which, I suspect, will not have me thrown out, but I will repeat it. These are interesting words:

"I think that there's not a stalemate and let's dispel this myth that somehow if we went into an unregulated system that the wheels would fall off the educational cart, that's not the case. I have every confidence in the educational system, in the teachers in that system who have had to take, I have to say, a huge amount of change over the years."

Those are not my words, but those of Mr Storey, speaking in favour of an unregulated system, if I am quoting him correctly, and I am quoting him correctly — from 'Stormont Live' on 21 December 2008.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** No.

I also find it interesting that the Alliance Party and the SDLP, which have again stated in the Chamber that they are opposed to academic selection, bring forward motions which enshrine academic selection in our future. The SDLP tells us that, since its foundation, it has been opposed to, and campaigned against, academic selection. That is very admirable indeed; but it is decision time.

It is time to stand up and be counted on the issue, because for 40 years —

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** No.

Those who support the grammar-school system have got off the hook on every occasion. Forty years ago when the SDLP was formed, many people were lobbying to have academic selection ended, because, in the words of the SDLP, it is "socially unjust and academically unsound". Why, in 2009, are we talking about continuing for another two years with a system that a majority of people accept is wrong? The SDLP is really saying that it wants to continue with it for another two years, when it has already continued for 40 years from 1967.

On Sinn Féin's watch, the system will not continue. The state will no longer sponsor academic selection in any way, and we will not allow the small minority of schools to dictate to the majority of schools how the education system should be run.

**Mrs M Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** No.

It will not happen on our watch.

On many occasions, I have listened to and debated at length with the DUP on academic selection. I remain somewhat bewildered about why that party supports it.

I do not understand why it brought the issue of academic selection into the constitutional negotiations at St Andrews. Where was the demand in the unionist community to bring that matter to St Andrews? I do not remember marches, protests or any sort of demand from any community or sector to bring such an issue to St Andrews. The DUP brought the matter to St Andrews — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The DUP got crumbs off the desk of the British Government.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** No.

The DUP has achieved a political stalemate on the matter. It believed that it had secured the future of academic selection. It may have done so in the legislation somewhere, but it has not done so in terms of the Department of Education funding or supporting it. We have to move beyond selection. In the earlier debate, Miss McIlveen outlined the fact that education underachievement is most prevalent in deprived working-class areas. We all have such areas in our constituencies, so why did the DUP make academic selection one of the issues at constitutional negotiations?

In many cases, the very reason for education underachievement is that children are told at age 11 that they are a failure. There is no point in supporting children at the age of three with extra resources if, when they get to 11, they are told that they are a failure because of two one-hour tests. In the future weeks and months, the pressure should be applied to the small minority of schools who insist on continuing with academic selection. They should be told that the game is over.

**Mr B McCrea:** I rise to bring a bit of calm and decorum to this overheated House. I have a vision. I see a runaway train, driven by the Minister of Education, hurtling towards Cassandra crossing. The Minister of Education has taken away the bridge and said not to worry because the train will jump the chasm anyway. Have I ever heard anything as ridiculous in my life?

When I heard John O'Dowd pontificate about failure, I was struck by the abject failure of the House to get any possible solution. Compromise was mentioned, but there is no such thing as compromise in this place. The Minister of Education said that she wanted to see leadership. When one has leadership with no followers, one gets dictatorship. This is a dictatorship; it is going nowhere and it will bring this place down. The Minister should think about the political consequences of her action.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way — I am not sure which Member, but I am

grateful anyway. Does the Member agree that, sadly, the Minister of Education is now the Minister of mediocrity?

**Mr B McCrea:** I cannot agree more. This is about mediocrity and about make-do and mend. This is not about the future or about vision.

That is a disgrace. The Minister of Education will leave her legacy, on which people will look back. I am not sure whether Members have seen the film called 'The Age of Stupid'. Now is the age of stupid: the age of inability to find compromise and to provide genuine leadership.

4.00 pm

We are in the process of bringing out facts and figures. People refer to "a privileged few". Let me say that 42% of children attend grammar schools. That is not a privileged few. A significant number of children attend secondary modern schools. They have a perfectly good, fantastic education and love their schools. They are not a privileged few. However, 25% of the school-aged population has problems with educational underachievement. That has nothing to do with the 11-plus; it has everything to do with social deprivation.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for giving way. One of the previous Members to speak said that there is no demand for academic selection. Is it not the case that a survey carried out by the Member's predecessor as Minister of Education, and who is from the same party, found that 64% of parents who responded wanted the retention of academic selection? That nails the myth that there is no desire among the public for academic selection.

**Mr B McCrea:** Absolutely: Mr Weir makes a good point very well. It answers precisely Mr O'Dowd's position.

I do not read from notes often in the Chamber. However, I was given some notes, which, when I read them, I thought were good. I have, therefore, decided to share a few of them. One issue that they raise is that since the Minister has taken up office, she has, unfortunately, presided over a dysfunctional and ill-thought-out set of reforms that have caused much angst, confusion and even anger in the Chamber.

It is time for the Minister to adopt a different, less abrasive style, like mine. It is time for a new period of sensible consensus to emerge on post-primary transfer. That will not be easy. However, it is the Assembly's duty to try to do more. It is on the record that the Ulster Unionist Party, although it recognises why grammar schools have set out their own entrance tests, does not believe that that is a sustainable basis for transfer into the future.

The claims of victory that come from certain quarters appear ludicrous to parents, children and

teachers who face educational chaos. The Minister must realise that if she continues on her current course, parents, teachers and, above all, children will suffer. In reality, we, politicians, suffer little. We can have fun with our little political rivalries and postures. However, children and the public will hold us to account.

The motion is sensible and will give the Assembly, the Minister and the Executive the vital breathing space that they need to move forward with some form of consensus. Make no mistake: unless everyone agrees, nothing happens in Northern Ireland. To that end, I welcome the recent input of the three main Protestant churches. They want a sustainable solution.

My party also accepts that the 11-plus has had its day; it was designed for a different time. In the past, my party argued for the test's limited retention in order to ensure some continuity and balance in order to deliver schools from chaos. However, it is now happy to support the recommissioning of the CCEA test, which the Minister unwisely abandoned. There will be serious issues with regard to its design and piloting, but the Assembly must come up with something.

Even at this late hour, it is within the Minister of Education's power to prevent the education system from falling further into chaos. She can set aside her ideological prejudice and put children's welfare first. She can support the motion's principles.

My party supports the substantive motion.

**Mr McCausland:** I, too, support the motion. I welcome the fact that colleagues in the Alliance Party have brought it forward.

The first part of the motion reminds Members:

"That this Assembly notes that schools may choose to use an examination as part of their entry criteria".

That is the situation, which, I am aware, is difficult for some members of Sinn Féin to acknowledge and accept. However, it is a reality. They have not managed to abolish academic selection.

They have failed utterly and miserably to do that. That is because during the discussions at St Andrews, the DUP addressed the issue of selection, and the current provision whereby it is possible to select children for a grammar school on the basis of academic criteria was retained. Therefore, that provision will not be given away, and Sinn Féin is impotent in that it is incapable of taking it away.

John O'Dowd told the House — very forcibly — that a minority should not dictate to a majority. I am glad to hear that. However, the point was made that survey after survey has made it clear that the majority of people in Northern Ireland favour the retention of an appropriate form of academic selection. In one survey, even a majority of Sinn Féin supporters said that they favoured the retention of academic selection.

Therefore, it is not a case of a minority dictating to a majority. The position is absolutely clear: the majority of people in Northern Ireland support the DUP view, which is shared by the Ulster Unionist Party.

The motion recognises the reality, rather than the unreality and the pretend world in which Sinn Féin wants to live. It calls on the Minister to recommission the CCEA test — which she abandoned on 2 February — in order that schools may use it for a maximum of two years. In other words, there should be a two-year breathing space that will provide an opportunity both for proper debate and real discussion and for calm reflection on the issue, rather than the confrontational and bullish approach that we have seen the Minister and her party demonstrate. I remember her party leader's comment to the effect that the Minister's role is to implement Sinn Féin policy. The Minister is trying to implement a policy, but it is one that she is incapable of implementing because of the provisions of the St Andrews Agreement.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McCausland:** OK; why not?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Is the Member telling us that after two years of quiet reflection, the DUP will agree to abolish academic selection?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Member for his intervention, because it gives me an extra minute in which to speak.

The key point is that reflection is not about predetermined outcomes; it is about consideration. The fact is that the DUP is prepared to sit down and have a proper discussion, but not one that involves the head-to-head confrontation in which the Minister has indulged over what we were told earlier has been the past two years. She has indulged in a confrontational, bullying approach through which she has told the House that she is the Minister and that that is that. That is not the way in which to get the consensus that we need on the issue.

At the moment, there is no consensus even in the academic world. I could speak to one academic in the field of education in Queen's University who will give me one view, but another in that sphere will give me a contrary view. The Minister tells us that everybody except Sinn Féin is out of step. However, that is not the case. She does not recognise the reality of the legislative position or the reality of the variety of views on the issue.

Over the years, there has been no proper discussion of the matter. If we were given the opportunity to have that interim period, some security for parents and children would be provided, there could be debate on

the matter, and the issue could progress from the current stand-off. However, an unregulated selection system is in place, regardless of whether the Minister likes it. I acknowledge that it is not the best system, but it is much better than her other option of having no selection. The Minister has acknowledged that a CCEA test that would not have an impact on the teaching of the revised curriculum could be introduced. Therefore, there is no justification for the Minister's position and every justification for supporting the motion.

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

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé sásta labhairt ar an rún agus ar an leasú inniu.

I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate on the motion and the amendment, although I will be unable to support either.

I believe that the Alliance Party's proposal is a complete departure from that party's policy position. I listened carefully to the explanation and rationale that was offered by the proposer of the motion, but the proposal lacks any coherence or detail on how any interim or compromise position would work in practice in relation to grammar-school intake. For example, the absence of any reference to social deprivation fatally undermines the proposal.

**Mrs Long:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McLaughlin:** I would rather get into the argument, if that is OK. I will see how I get on and will, if I can, leave some space for an intervention.

The absence of any reference to social deprivation seriously undermines the entire rationale for dealing with the inequities that exist in the current system, and to argue for preserving that system, in many ways, betrays that party's position.

I took the trouble to read the Alliance Party's position; it supports the abolition of the 11-plus, and it argues that schools should not be allowed to use academic ability to decide who should be given a place. That party's policy is also that children should progress to study a common middle-school curriculum for three years and argues that existing schools could provide what it describes as a middle-school education; that is an important point.

The policy position of the Alliance Party is also, importantly, that the election of a particular educational route should be deferred until the age of 14. Those views are the basis of consensus and agreement. It is regrettable that the Alliance Party should depart from that. I am reminded of the day that the Alliance Party Members re-designated themselves in the Assembly to provide support to the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. I also recall that, in relation to that episode, the Alliance Party promised to

never again abandon its principles; I suppose that this is a case of “*déjà vu* all over again”.

**Mrs Long:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McLaughlin:** No. Please allow me to develop the argument.

I will explain my opposition to the SDLP's amendment. Although the middle section of the amendment is drawn directly from the guidelines produced by the Department, the opening statement sits curiously against the SDLP position, as defined by Dominic Bradley 18 months ago. He described the compromise proposals as a clear climb down from the Minister's stated position on academic selection. He railed:

“The Minister has caved in to pressure from those who are opposed to reform.”

He also said that bringing forward compromise proposals was:

“the thin end of the wedge for the continuation of the 11-Plus into the future”.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McLaughlin:** No. I hope that I am annoying you, because I am quoting the facts.

Today's amendment can only be described as yet another U-turn, and a betrayal of the mandate to abolish academic selection that the SDLP, since its inception, has sought from the electorate. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Before I was interrupted, I was making the point that the SDLP is abandoning its mandate. We heard some reference today to that party's consistency; where is the consistency? Some people will see that party's position as contradictory and illogical, and that is probably the kindest remark that could be made about the SDLP argument that we heard today.

It is important to state that the process in which we are now involved is a one of necessary change — it is not change for the sake of change. It is a process of change with the sole aim of developing and building on the successes and the good, strong points of the current system, while addressing the serious inequalities and weaknesses that also, undoubtedly, exist.

What I have heard from across the Floor is that all parties are articulating a desire to have an education system that delivers and produces the sort of educational outcomes that we need, as a society, in order to face the challenges that will emerge in the years ahead.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** If Members have private conversations to hold, please hold them outside the Chamber.

4.15 pm

**Miss McIlveen:** It looks like this council is still trapped in groundhog day on this issue. It should be clear to all of us by now that it simply does not matter what Dominic Bradley and Mr Lunn say about post-primary transfer — or whether Basil McCrea takes a heart attack in the middle of the debate — the Minister will simply ignore us.

**Mr Kennedy:** Which council is it?

**Miss McIlveen:** We can continue to put forward motions, but she will still pay no attention whatsoever, because they do not fit in with her party political agenda.

The DUP has been very clear on this issue. We fought to retain academic selection: it is what parents want, and it is clear that it is what more schools and teachers across the communities are willing to now say that they want, despite the bullying tactics of the Minister, who has now left the Chamber. The Department —

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member withdraw the remarks that have caused the Minister of Education to walk out of the Assembly? *[Laughter.]*

**Miss McIlveen:** Indeed. Despite the Minister's bullying tactics, the Department and her friends in INTO, it will not make a lot of difference.

We believe that academic selection is best for our children's education and for having an effective and well-equipped workforce for the future of Northern Ireland. On that basis, it is obvious that the DUP cannot accept the SDLP's amendment. I had to laugh when I read that one of the political bloggers — a former SDLP special adviser — had suggested that the amendment represented an attempt by the SDLP to seek to break the 11-plus deadlock. Unfortunately, if this amendment is the best that the SDLP can do then I am disappointed at its lack of imagination and understanding of the position of the two unionist parties and of the legislative reality that is in place.

Surely the SDLP knows that the DUP will not back the amendment, as the retention of selective transfer remains a key part of our education policy. The Minister —

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Miss McIlveen:** No; I have plenty to say. The Minister, Sinn Féin and the SDLP must accept the fact that academic selection is staying and that nothing can be done without the agreement of those on the Benches on this side of the House. Only when that is accepted can we move forward. The problem that Northern Ireland faces time and again is that some parties work towards aspirations rather than dealing with political

realities. Given that academic selection has been retained through legislation, it would have been a much more productive use of the SDLP's time to put forward a proposal incorporating that fact in a way that would be of benefit to children across Northern Ireland.

In February, the Minister told us to think of the children.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Miss McIlveen:** I have plenty to say.

We do think of the children; we also think of the education system, parents and society in general. We think about what the Minister is doing to children, parents and schools through her intransigence. We think about the emotional strains that are being placed on families throughout Northern Ireland while the Minister plays party political games with our children's futures for some ideological aspiration.

The parties should be working together to formulate a system of academic selection that addresses the flaws in the old 11-plus. I am not wearing rose-coloured glasses and thinking about the wonderful system that it was; but its problems can be addressed, and the Minister must remove her own blinkers on the matter. She previously said that the CCEA could produce a test; if that is the case, then it should be done. I do not agree with claims of chaos and scaremongering about entrance tests, but I do feel that the current unregulated system is not ideal.

The DUP has always been clear on that point; we previously proposed that a CCEA test — to agreed specifications — should be set for a period of up to three years, and that such testing could and should be carried out in primary schools. That period could be used to settle on a long-term method for transfer, and for any new system to allow for the continuation of academic selection. Any replacement test would have to address criticisms of a high-stakes nature; susceptibility to coaching; poor differentiation of results, and the time delay in waiting for results. Such problems are not insurmountable, given the progress of technology.

The DUP had also proposed the establishment of an agreed panel of experts with experience of transfer procedures, which would advise the Department of Education and the Assembly on the development of the best arrangements for us in Northern Ireland.

The Minister chose not to listen and not to seek consensus; she continues to plough her lone furrow — and stuff the consequences. I back the Alliance Party's motion —

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

**Miss McIlveen:** I fear that the Minister will once again ignore the will of the Assembly, the will of parents and the common will of our children.

**Mr Kennedy:** In addressing the motion, it is interesting to reflect on where we have come from. On 10 November 2008, the Assembly passed an Ulster Unionist Party motion, which stated:

"That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to end the uncertainty facing parents and teachers of children in Primary 6 by continuing with the existing post-primary transfer test until a replacement is designed and piloted by CCEA." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 35, p4, col 2*].

That resolution is guidance. Of course, the Minister recently issued her own guidance, for which schools must have regard; they cannot disregard it. That means that a board of governors can simply put the guidance on the agenda of a meeting, read it, have regard to it, decide that the guidance is not for that school and then move on. The guidance that the House gave the Minister last year, however, is slightly different. The Minister is subject to the ministerial code, which contains a Pledge of Office.

On 8 May 2007, the Minister told the House:

"Yes, I am willing to take up the office of Minister of Education, and I affirm the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p7, col 2*]

Paragraph (f) of the Pledge of Office states that the Minister affirms:

"to support, and to act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee and Assembly;"

Is the Minister, therefore, in breach of the Pledge of Office, and how many votes will the Minister ignore before she is finally willing to engage?

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member join me in considering the supposed advantages of the St Andrews Agreement that there would be no solo runs by any Minister and that academic selection would no longer be an issue?

**Mr Kennedy:** I agree with the Member's sentiments. Unfortunately, we are now in educational gridlock, which is in nobody's interest.

The close similarity between the motion in today's Order Paper and our motion of last year means that my colleagues and I are happy to endorse the motion; however, we cannot support the SDLP amendment. It is too prescriptive, particularly as it appears to rule out entirely a role for academic criteria in a post-primary transfer process. If there is to be consensus, it must ensure that concern for social justice is united with, and not set in false opposition to, concern for academic excellence. The amendment, although well intentioned, unfortunately fails that test.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kennedy:** Briefly.

**Mr D Bradley:** Does the Member recall that Mr Lunn clarified the Alliance Party's position when he outlined the terms of the motion? He said that the motion is not intended to be test-dependent alone and that the Alliance Party also wants non-academic criteria to be contained in the guidance. Therefore, any party that supports the motion will be supporting the view of the Alliance Party as Mr Lunn expressed clearly.

**Mr Kennedy:** I accept the Member's point; however, that is not established explicitly in the motion. It may be implicit, and that might have been the intention of the motion, but when and if the motion passes it will not include an explicit reference to such a system, unlike the SDLP's amendment.

The debate over post-primary transfer has been ongoing for well over a decade, perhaps longer. If the Minister and her party still do not recognise that consensus and give and take are the only ways forward, I am left wondering whether they want our education system to be thrown into complete and utter chaos as they act out their bizarre Che Guevara fantasies of class strife. Sometimes, I think that the Minister's views were fashioned in the jungles of Colombia.

However, we are where we are. The motion is reasonable, because it attempts to guide the Minister out of the hole that she has dug for herself. The Minister's cancellation of the CCEA test that she commissioned has left our education system in a mess. Restarting the process to develop that test on a short-term basis is the only realistic way out of that position and would provide clarity for schools, parents and children. The unregulated system that the Minister has left us with is unsustainable — she should accept that and seek to improve the situation.

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

**Mr Kennedy:** The terms of the motion provides that the Minister should offer a short-term solution while the Executive get to grips with the issue.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I support the amendment. The SDLP totally supports the abolition of the 11-plus, which is socially unjust and academically unsound, irrespective of some of the comments that we heard during the debate.

The 11-plus can segregate and be the cause of much undue stress for pupils, teachers and parents. Our amendment allows for the end of the 11-plus and, essentially, the end of academic selection. It will also allow for an early resolution and a more unified way forward for the transfer of children from primary to post-primary education. There is much confusion about that issue, which has been caused by the bickering and the political point scoring over the past

year or so. It is time that we made the scenario educator-led. After all, the educators will be thrust into the middle of whatever system is eventually put into practice, and it is they who will work to teach and mould the children who may well be the high achievers of tomorrow.

It is essential that children, parents and teachers alike are given some sort of solace amid all the confusion. There needs to be a general test set by CCEA, and no matter where schools are in the league table, they should not be allowed to meet their intake quota from the result of that, or any other, test. That will give all children the chance to excel.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs M Bradley:** No, I am sorry.

We agree with the first criterion referred to in transfer 2010, which should, in essence, help to tackle social deprivation. However, we have a concern about area-based criteria in situations where there are post-primary schools sited in the heart of residential areas that are graded as being socially deprived. That is particularly relevant in my constituency. Under the Minister's proposals, children from those areas will be forced into schools in which the bulk of pupils are classed as underachievers and linked to social deprivation.

We commend the amendment to Sinn Féin and ask its Members to support it if they are serious about the abolition of academic selection. Are they going to sit back and allow the top schools to create their own selection process that cannot be regulated, which will allow them to take a *carte blanche* approach, do as they wish and answer to no one?

**Mrs Long:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs M Bradley:** No; I am sorry, I refused before.

With our amendment, there can still be some control, and guidelines can be issued for all schools to adhere to. Within the past hour, we were discussing the chief inspector's report, which outlined a mixed bag of standards and quality through primary and post-primary education. If we cannot sort out the mess around academic selection, I dread the next report.

I urge the Minister to listen to the people and commission a standard test for the next few years to allow an educator-led working group to create a non-selective transfer procedure that can be used as a basis for a legally bound regulation. The Minister should give the educational professionals the chance to succeed where political footballers have evidently failed. Our children and the educators are those who suffer.

It is time for it to end. We cannot and should not expect the educators, the children or their parents to go forward with a deregulated system; it is not fair.

I support the amendment.

4.30 pm

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I acknowledge the support of Trevor Lunn and the Alliance Party for the ending of academic selection. However, I am disappointed that they and he are not following through on their party policy on the matter.

I am also disappointed that the Education Committee has failed to reach a consensus to date. I note that the Chairperson of the Committee is attempting to misrepresent the Committee, as he did previously when I appeared before them, when he claimed to speak for all of the members when making statements. It was obvious that he did not speak for everyone, as my colleague John O'Dowd has stated.

The motion is yet another attempt to block or slow the process of change that I have set in motion. That process is designed to provide a first-class education for all of our children. The system that the proposers of the motion wish to keep in place was a failed one, and I have already made it clear that the status quo is not an option.

As I stated to the Education Committee two weeks ago, last year's test was the last 11-plus. That system was designed 60 years ago, and it is clearly not fit for the modern world. Not only was it outdated, but it was fundamentally wrong, based on academic apartheid, and it condemned the majority of our children as failures. In my opinion, no child is a failure. For that reason alone, there will be no further state-sponsored testing at 11 years old.

Cur chuige neamhoiriúnach agus neamhleor is ea an roghnú acadúil; cur chuige éagórach amach is amach atá ann. Tá córas oideachais uainn atá bunaithe ar an bpáiste agus a fhreastalaíonn ar riachtanais shaol an lae inniu.

Academic selection is an inappropriate and inadequate approach to education. It is also unjust and fundamentally wrong. We need an education system that is child-centred, and meets the needs of our modern world. I am anxious to see change that delivers for all of our children, and allows each of them to develop their own individual strengths and talents — a system that builds on the individual strengths that every single one of our children possesses, whatever that strength is. The singular focus on academic ability must be replaced by a focus on all talents and aptitudes.

In the absence of regulations, I have issued guidance. The policy of the Department of Education is transfer 2010. Schools will be obliged, in law, to have regard for the guidance. On equality grounds, and also because of risks of dysfunction, the guidance strongly recommends that schools do not use academic admissions criteria. If a school chooses to do so, it

must provide for itself the robust assessment mechanism and procedures that such criteria require.

Secondly, and more importantly, the Department strongly recommends that academic admissions criteria are not used because of the fundamental inequality and injustice of academic selection.

That brings me to the second part of the motion, which calls on me to recommission the CCEA test to enable schools to use it for a maximum of two years. I proposed the test for three years, not two. I proposed a legislative framework accompanying a test that would limit its use across that three-year period, thus phasing out academic selection. That would have been a transition with a very clear outcome, ending the inequality that is academic selection.

I sought engagement on that proposal over a period of eight months. That opportunity was not taken up, and, because of that failure, and the blocking of discussion on two occasions by the DUP, I took the decision to move on. We are where we are.

People say that I have no power, but the 11-plus is gone for ever, and I welcome and celebrate that. The amendment contains elements that are helpful, notably in their support of the free school meals criterion, and other criteria recommended by the guidance published by my Department on 2 February 2009. However, I find it strange that an approach is being proposed that was condemned as a climbdown last year. My colleague Mitchel McLaughlin has stated that better than I can. The song 'Blowin' in the Wind' comes to mind.

The amendment proposes another working group, as if Burns, Gallagher, Costello and the non-selective systems that dominate the PISA tables have not told us enough already.

**Mr Storey:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. When the Minister makes political comments about the SDLP, is she speaking as a member of Sinn Féin or as the Minister of Education in the four-party mandatory coalition?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I made it clear when I called the Minister to speak that I had called the Minister of Education.

**The Minister of Education:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Speaking as the Minister of Education, I will not reinstate the failed system for two more years. Many of those who are seeking interim arrangements are merely seeking an extension of the status quo.

Agus sin an fáth nach mbeidh síneadh ar an tesist teipthe, nó ní dhéanfaidh sin ach páistí atá faoi mhíbhuntáiste eacnamaíochta a chur faoi dhá bhliain eile den roghnú sóisialta agus an neamhionannas a bhaineann leis.

Let me be clear about why there will be no extension of the status quo. It would mean two more years of economically disadvantaged children suffering the inequality of social selection.

**Mrs Long:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Education:** I will not. How did the 11-plus serve this year's admissions process? For admissions in the 2008-09 school year: 77 out of 135 children in Holywood's four primary schools transferred into a grammar school; in the seven primary schools serving the Malone Road area, 214 out of 235 children transferred into a grammar school; in the two primary schools serving the Stranmillis area, 62 out of 93 children transferred into a grammar school. However, in the three schools that largely serve the Sandy Row area, 11 out of 79 children transferred into a grammar school; in the three primary schools that largely serve the Shankill area, 10 out of 104 children transferred to a grammar school; in the seven schools serving the Falls area, the figure was 49 out of 284. Members must represent their constituencies.

Two more years of the status quo would mean two more years of appalling figures, which are clear indicators of profound and damaging inequality. Do the proposers of the motion want me to continue with that socio-economic determinism? Are they really urging me to maintain an admissions process that, with grim certainty, leads to the appalling statistic that, although one in four children in non-grammar schools is entitled to free school meals, the ratio in grammar schools is one in 17?

What would two more years of the status quo mean for primary schools? Do the Members who tabled the motion recognise the fact that they are urging me to allow the continued distortion of teaching in primary schools, as normal lessons are abandoned in order to put children through practice papers in preparation for a test? Some schools begin conditioning at P5. However, those who do not take the test — one third of all children — are left out of preparations and are, therefore, in danger of losing interest and falling behind in achieving basic levels of literacy and numeracy.

Although 10-year-old children in Europe and the rest of Ireland — and in every other part of the world — improve their literacy and numeracy skills, learn languages and participate in drama and sport during the next two years, the Members who tabled the motion want our children to be prepared for a test.

What would two more years of the status quo mean for children who attend non-grammar schools?  
[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Education:** I shall tell Members what it would mean for children in Fermanagh. There are 14 post-primary schools in Fermanagh, four of which are grammar schools and 10 of which are secondary schools. Pupil numbers in Fermanagh have fallen to such a degree that its four grammar schools now educate half of the county's post-primary schoolchildren. The other 10 non-grammar schools educate the remaining half. Consequently, one quarter of the desks in the 10 non-grammar schools are empty.

Of the children who attend those non-grammar schools, 20.3 % are entitled to free school meals. Those 10 schools educate 109 children who are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs. In contrast, the four grammar schools are full, and 7.1% of their children are entitled to free school meals. Only nine of their children are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs. Thanks to the 11-plus test and the selection process, Fermanagh has a fundamentally divided post-primary school system, in which 10 schools absorb all the area's various challenges.

An bhfuilimid ag iarraidh dhá bhliain eile den chóras sin a bheith ann do pháistí Fhear Manach? Tá an rud céanna le feiceáil i mBéal Feirste, i nDoire agus in áiteanna eile. An é sin an córas atá moltóirí an rúin ag iarraidh a bheith ann go cionn dhá bhliain eile?

Do we want two more years of that for the children of Fermanagh? The same can be observed in Belfast, in Derry and elsewhere throughout the North of Ireland. Is that the system in which supporters of the motion would like to continue?

I have heard suggestions that the Catholic Church proposals may contain a request for the Department to recommission the test as an interim measure for a set period of years before academic selection would end after some future debate. Any attempt to construct another test would, in my view, be totally contrary to the principles of social justice to which the Catholic Church is publicly committed. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Order.

**The Minister of Education:** It would be in conflict with the policy of the whole Catholic sector, which is to move away from the current process of academic selection to a more just, modern and fit-for-purpose system.

The third and final part of the motion calls on the Executive to agree new, legally binding guidelines for post-primary transfer for use from 2011. I sought to do just that. Indeed, the commission for the CCEA test — now cancelled — was a specific contingency to provide options that might enable agreement on a legislative framework for transfer 2010 and beyond — the challenge presented to us all by the St Andrews Agreement.

I twice brought forward proposals to the Executive for just such a legislative framework. Those proposals reflected my party's opposition to academic selection, but also acknowledged the views of educationalists with whom they were developed, and the views of pro-selective colleagues in Government. Why else would I propose three more years of academic selection, even on a declining basis? Those proposals were not even discussed. That is why I abandoned them, that is why I decommissioned the CCEA test, and that is why I decided to proceed with the guidelines.

The absence of a test and regulations is a result of the refusal to engage politically — and the blocking of any discussion of my proposals at Executive level — by the DUP. Twice I brought proposals to the Executive. That failure to engage caused uncertainty for parents, teachers and children, and was the most pressing reason for any decision to move forward on guidance.

I reiterate that in the absence of political agreement there will be no state-sponsored test: I will not reinstate the status quo. I have set out the criteria that will be used to transfer children to post-primary education from 2010. The Department's transfer 2010 guidance provides admissions criteria that are already widely used and which promise clarity, and — for the first time ever — fairness.

Any entrance test that operates outside that guidance is in a legal minefield, as some grammar schools proposing such an approach are finding out. If they continue, they will generate a damaging confusion for parents and pupils. Therefore, I again urge them to consider carefully the consequences of standing outside the system and of breaking away.

The transfer 2010 guidance has been issued for public consultation, and I have written to parents of primary 6 pupils to explain the content. The guidance is not preferable to regulation; however, if it is followed, it will deliver an effective and fair system of post-primary transfer. It will also deliver a system of post-primary transfer that will help to answer the wider and desperately urgent reform agenda of embracing demographic decline and schools sustainability, the delivery of the entitlement framework and underachievement. If departmental policy and the guidance are followed, we will have, for the first time, a system of transfer based on social justice, equality and excellence.

Rather than continue to knock on doors that have already been shut in our faces, rather than revisit ideas of proposals blocked, then blocked again, I call on those genuine people who support change to grasp this opportunity to end once and for all the practice of forcing 10-year-old children to sit tests in order that some can access the education to which all should be entitled.

The train has left the station. Transfer 2010 is departmental policy, and I look forward to working with every Member to build an education system of excellent quality for all children.

4.45 pm

**Mr O'Loan:** The debate addresses an issue of fundamental importance to society. If we were living in a normal society with a normal Government, the failure to bring forward a regulated method for the transfer of children from the primary to the secondary sector of education would, undoubtedly, cause the fall of that Government. That is the challenge facing the Minister, and she has not answered it.

I do not deny that the Minister's task has not been easy, given that the unionist parties, who fundamentally oppose the removal of academic selection, occupy precisely half of the seats in the Assembly. However, many people in the community to whom I speak, including educators and parents, are reflecting with great anxiety on how the Minister has confronted this difficult task.

The SDLP amendment is a serious attempt to get the Assembly out of an extremely difficult situation. It is a substantial and comprehensive amendment that deserves the serious consideration of the Assembly.

**Mr D Bradley:** Does the Member agree that the test referred to in the amendment is the same one as originally proposed by the Minister? At that time, the SDLP had reservations, but she reassured us that the test could be used without distorting the primary-school curriculum in any way.

**Mr O'Loan:** I certainly found the comments of the Minister, and of Sinn Féin's spokesperson on education, strange, and I will probably refer to that later.

Let us consider the party positions on the motion and the amendment. The SDLP supports the motion, as amended; the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party support the original motion; and Sinn Féin supports neither. The Alliance Party supports the motion, having brought it forward — its members seem to agree with much of the amendment, from what they said, but essentially the original motion is the position that it wants to sustain.

Those party positions demonstrate the weakness of the original motion. The parties that support the motion are those that are absolutely opposed, in principle, to academic selection and those that are adamant that it must continue. The motion is not a compromise, as one Member attempted to say. It would not deliver a solution; it would not be an instruction to the Minister to create a workable system.

**Mr Poots:** Does the Member agree that Sinn Féin's isolationist position today is indicative of what it has done on education before? Martin McGuinness went

down the route of privatisation through PFI, and Caitríona Ruane is now going down the route of privatisation through having a private test set for academic selection.

**Mr O'Loan:** There is no doubt that we are walking into an unregulated system. However, I do not find the position of the Member's party any more constructive than that of the Minister's party.

The fundamental failure of the Alliance Party's motion is that it does not specify the proportion of pupils to be admitted using the test. That is why parties with quite different principles were able to support it. The motion gives no indication of a pathway or timetable towards creating a system of regulated transfer without academic selection. All of those things are provided in the SDLP's amendment.

I will comment on the remarks that were made by Members. Dominic Bradley argued that the amendment was required in order to address the uncertainty. He pointed out the weaknesses in the Alliance Party's motion and he argued the potential for the entitlement framework and for area-based planning to deliver a system that would have the confidence of parents. I listened carefully to speeches from Democratic Unionist Party Members, including Mervyn Storey, Nelson McCausland and Michelle McIlveen. I struggled to discover what they might contribute to a consensus, but I did not find it.

Nelson McCausland made some reference to sitting down and giving due consideration, but he gave no indication whatsoever as to what he would bring to the table in such discussions. Without that offering from the Democratic Unionist Party, we will not begin to break the current stalemate.

**Mr Storey:** As the Member is a former teacher who taught in a grammar school in Ballymena —

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

**Mr Storey:** What advice does the Member have for parents whose children are facing entrance tests for schools in Ballymena?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Time is up. I call Dr Farry to conclude the debate and make a winding-up speech on the substantive motion.

**Dr Farry:** This has been an incredible debate on probably the most important issue on which the people of Northern Ireland are looking to the Assembly for answers. In the Assembly, we have to deal with real-world choices. The choice facing us is not about whether to abolish the 11-plus and move to a situation in which there will be no academic selection. The real-world choice facing us is whether to have a regulated system that includes academic selection for an interim period, to provide some breathing space, or

to have an unregulated system that includes academic selection. That is the choice facing us, and we must face up to that reality. We cannot afford to bury our heads in the sand and deny what is happening in the wider world.

**Mrs Long:** With regard to the specific point that was made about social inequality — and I agree with the Minister that there are issues concerning selection and social equality — does the Member agree that it will be more socially divisive to have an unregulated system in which people who are already most advantaged will be best able to negotiate their way through that system?

**Dr Farry:** Absolutely. The Minister made great play of quoting figures in relation to what happens in different communities across Northern Ireland, and she laid down the challenge to people in the Assembly. However, that challenge must be handed back to the Minister — come back this time next year, after the test has been introduced for a year, and quote the new figures. What we will find is that social inequality in the system will be even worse, and things will not have changed one bit for the better.

We cannot have the situation whereby a Minister opts for ideological purity and says that what she has done is Sinn Féin's position, while, at the same time, washing her hands of the consequences of that policy for the rest of our society. As Mr O'Loan said, we must have a regulated system for Northern Ireland, and to not have that is an act of rank irresponsibility.

The Alliance Party is perfectly clear about its policy and preferred option. We have had that policy for many years throughout the debates on the issue, and I thank Mitchel McLaughlin for setting it out so well. However, we have to adjust our views to meet the realities that we face, and, when facts change, it is only right that opinions change to meet those facts. I dare say that, at different times, virtually every party in the Chamber has shown some degree of responsibility in changing their policies to reflect the new circumstances facing them. Indeed, if we go through the history of Sinn Féin, it has changed policies on many occasions, and we would not be in the situation of power sharing today had it not changed its position on a number of issues.

**Mr Poots:** Not only is the Alliance Party looking to realities, but the person whom Ms Ruane liked to quote — Stanley Poots, the headmaster of Dromara Primary School — was not speaking on behalf of 30 schools in the Lisburn area and is actually having pupils taught and prepared for tests in his own school, as well as in the other schools that he purported to represent.

**Dr Farry:** I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. I may come to that point in a moment.

I want to be quite clear about what the Alliance Party is trying to do today. First and foremost, we are trying to avoid a complete disaster facing the education system in Northern Ireland due to an unregulated system; and, in doing so, to provide a breathing space for a consensual solution to emerge. We will keep our fingers crossed on that, because we have not reached it thus far. However, that is our ultimate responsibility, and we should not lose sight of that.

An unregulated system is a damning indictment of the failure of the Assembly to deal with the most important issue facing our society. There will be massive consequences for children and parents from an unregulated system. There will be increased trauma from this system, even more trauma than is currently faced through the 11-plus. Some children will face not two tests, but, potentially, three tests under the Association for Quality Education's (AQE) system. Indeed, the Catholic system may introduce its own tests at some point in the near future. It is not beyond the realms of possibility for some children to take tests under both systems. How many tests are those children going to be facing? Therefore, children will be facing not only more tests, but they will be doing them in a different environment from their own primary school, adding further to the trauma.

**Mr D Bradley:** Can the Member confirm — as was outlined earlier by Mr Lunn — that the motion means that only the CCEA test should be used, and used in conjunction with other, non-academic admissions criteria?

**Dr Farry:** I can give a “yes” to both of those points, and I will come to that in further detail, too.

Primary schools are placed in a totally impossible situation at the moment. They want to follow the guidance from the Minister and be responsible, but they are also listening to the views and demands of parents. In practice, many primary schools will be trying to facilitate parents' wishes on this issue. Some parents will opt for additional, external coaching. When that happens, it will play into the hands of those who have the money to pay for that coaching, further increasing the inequality in the system. Is that fair?

There are huge problems for the grammar schools that will be conducting the tests. No doubt there will be an increased risk of legal challenges occurring —

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member has spoken quite eloquently about parents who want their children to take three or four tests. What about those parents who do not want their children to take tests? What about those parents who are, in some circumstances, forced to have their children take tests because they believe that those tests will lead to their children going to the best school, even though that may not be the reality.

What about those parents? Do those parents not have rights?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Certainly, no one is forced to take a test, and I have a lot of sympathy for what the Member is saying. That is why the Alliance Party wants to work with Sinn Féin to achieve a consensual solution that does not involve academic selection in the longer-term. However, we must deal with the realities at the moment. Although I believe that grammar schools would be foolish to go down the route of independent testing, the reality is that they are determined to do so, and I cannot stop them from doing so.

**Mrs Long:** Neither can the Minister.

**Dr Farry:** The Minister cannot either, nor can anyone else in the Chamber. Therefore, our responsibility is to meet that reality in the best way possible, through a regulated system, which is offered by the CCEA test.

I accept the abolition of the 11-plus. That is the difference between the motion tabled by the Alliance Party today and that tabled by the UUP last autumn. The Department itself has devised the CCEA test, and that is a point worth stressing. Therefore, when the Minister talks about matters of principle, the Minister has already conceded the point through commissioning a CCEA test for development. She has referred to it as a contingency option, but that point has already been conceded by the Minister. The CCEA test will be based firmly on the existing curriculum. It does not involve any skewing of teaching in primary schools.

In relation to what Dominic Bradley said, I believe that the CCEA test should be used as one option for schools with respect to admission, alongside the best of the other options in the transfer 2010 guidance set out by the Minister. I do not dismiss that document one bit — there is certainly value in it. However, we must use that guidance in line with the realities of what is happening on the ground — in particular, the socio-economic criteria within that are of some importance.

We must also bear in mind that what the Alliance Party is suggesting is a time-limited breathing space. That time must be properly used to try to find some consensus. Indeed, if people are talking about a new working group of educationalists, that is something that is worthy of consideration.

5.00 pm

The Minister has talked about compromise proposals not being accepted. The Alliance Party has always been prepared to engage on those proposals, and I encourage the Minister to put those back on the table, if she feels that that would be a better way forward. We are more than happy to talk about them, and I am sure that other parties would do likewise.

The Minister says that the compromise proposals were taken off the table because other parties would not engage. That means that the children of Northern Ireland are being punished because there is a lack of political agreement; it does not strike me as being a lack of leadership.

The SDLP amendment is a matter of tactics. Our motion is, deliberately, general in nature. It is based around the principle of putting the CCEA test back on the table as an option, for use by receiving schools. Tactically, we are trying to build as much consensus in the Chamber as we can, rather than being specific.

**Mr O'Loan:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Farry:** I will not give way. I am sorry, but I am running out of time.

The consensus that the Alliance Party is trying to achieve is one that is supported across society in Northern Ireland. Our consensus is more widespread, and I do not suggest that there is consensus around the proposals outlined by the Minister. The Catholic Church and the Protestant churches will reflect that later this week.

This is our last chance to take a step back from the brink. I urge the Assembly to use this chance wisely.

*Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.*

*Main Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes that schools may choose to use an examination as part of their entry criteria under the Minister of Education's 2010 guidelines; calls on the Minister of Education to re-commission the CCEA test, she abandoned on 2 February 2009, that schools may then use for a maximum of two years; and calls on the Executive to agree new, legally binding guidelines for post-primary transfer for use from 2011.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### Portadown College Newbuild

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

**Mr Simpson:** Portadown College is one of the jewels in the crown of the Craigavon-based Dickson plan for education. It has an outstanding academic track record and has been a great influence for good across the generations.

I visited the school no later than Thursday of last week and was, once again, greatly impressed by the staff's commitment to delivering excellence for young people in their care.

Portadown College has been awaiting a new building for too long. In the past few days, I received from the Minister a response to a question for oral answer that was not selected for answer in Question Time. She said:

"The Department has completed its assessment of a revised economic appraisal for Portadown College which was submitted by the Southern Education and Library Board. The Board has agreed to undertake further work on the option to complete a replacement school on the playing fields on the lower part of the existing school site."

That determination to press ahead with building on the playing fields is causing major concern at the college. The board of governors is of the opinion that the building of a new school on the playing fields is an unsatisfactory way to move forward. There are six objections to that intention. The school would disappear from view and be blocked by the natural amphitheatre that would be created by building the new college in a hollow.

Furthermore, the school would lose its playing fields for an extended period. The school holds a Sportsmark award, and it competes in the highest level of regional competitions in a variety of sports.

It has one of the largest A-level and GCSE physical education centres in Northern Ireland. When new playing fields are constructed, they are not immediately ready for use. That will extend the time during which those resources are unavailable, and that will have a detrimental effect on the students.

Locating new pitches on the elevated part of the site would be problematic. The proximity to neighbouring

houses and the main Killycomain Road would create a child-protection issue, as those pitches would be very exposed. Another problem is that health and safety issues and good-relations issues could be created by such things as rugby balls being kicked into gardens, breakages of windows, or rugby balls being kicked onto the Killycomain Road. The current location of the playing pitches is ideal and means that those issues are not a cause for concern.

Portadown College is a landmark school in the town. It has a proud history of academic and extra-curricular success. It has occupied its current position for approximately 60 years and is, consequently, a recognised landmark fronting onto the Killycomain Road. Changing the location of the school to the lower part of the site would raise significant objections from the local community. It is believed that, in particular, residents of the Gilford Road would object to that.

The current plan does not offer any solution to ongoing traffic problems on the Killycomain Road. Locating the new school on the footprint of the current buildings and demolishing the preparatory department would facilitate a satisfactory solution to that problem.

As with any school, traffic will be a problem at certain times of the day. However, the ability to take buses off the main road and into the school site through the proposed construction of a turning circle would be helpful and would reduce congestion. That would be made much easier if the new building were sited on the current footprint.

If the new school were located on the current playing pitches, the access arrangements for cars parking on the school site would also be of grave concern. The front of the school on the Killycomain Road would, essentially, become a large car park, and security issues would arise. A school building on the Killycomain Road frontage would be a much better solution, as that would allow for parking at the rear of the building, which would be more secure and less visible from the main road.

The current proposal to build on the playing fields appears to be based on the economic appraisal that was carried out in 2002-03, in which only two options were considered. Those two options were a refurbishment of the current school and a rebuild of the school. Since that time, the preparatory department has closed. The result is that the locating of a new school on the current footprint of the elevated part of the site has become a feasible option, as much space has been cleared as a result of that closure.

According to current Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) estimates, there is no significant cost differential between the two options. The leadership of Portadown College is satisfied that a phased construction and demolition of the buildings on

the current footprint is manageable. Noise and poor air quality are not currently problems and are not a reason to relocate the buildings.

I ask the Minister to instruct officials from her Department to visit Portadown College so that they can see for themselves the case for locating the new building on the current footprint. It is an outstanding college that offers an outstanding education to those who attend it — and provided such an education to those who attended it in the past. A new building would be very welcome. I hope that the Minister will agree that, since it will be a building that will serve Portadown College for many decades to come, it is essential that it be got right.

Those points were made by those who are on the front line of education — the very educationalists to whom the Minister wants us all to listen. I ask her to listen to what they are saying on this occasion.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this debate on Portadown College as it provides an opportunity to discuss the broader issue of post-primary provision in the controlled sector in the Craigavon area. I was recently in Portadown College with the Education Committee, where we held a very successful meeting. We were very well treated and welcomed by pupils and staff; it was an enjoyable experience. Even from the lecture theatre in which the meeting took place, it was clear that the school needs to be replaced. It is severely run down. The fabric and interior of the building are, without doubt, in need of replacement.

However, I have a broader concern about the Southern Education and Library Board's provision of post-primary education in the Craigavon area. There are two proposals from the SELB: one is to replace Portadown College; the other is to replace Lurgan College. Both of those are fine grammar schools in their own right, and both provide education under the terms of the Dickson plan.

In a recent meeting with the SELB, I was deeply concerned that it did not have an overall plan for the provision for post-primary education in the controlled sector. The plans to replace Portadown College are justified, but when I study the plans to replace Lurgan College, I ask why Lurgan College will be replaced while the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School is in its current condition. It is not adequate for the provision of education to the pupils who attend it.

When I posed that question to the SELB, it could not tell me why it has brought forward two proposals to replace two schools in the absence of an overall plan to replace the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School, which is attached to the old buildings of the Lurgan Technical College. Its space is restricted, it has no playing or sports facilities, and — even in its

interior — it does not provide adequate space or provision for the children who attend it.

I note that Mr Simpson referred more to where the Portadown College newbuild should be placed, although I am not aware of the technical details. However, there is a requirement for a wider debate about controlled provision in the Craigavon area because the current plans of the SELB are inadequate. To go ahead with two newbuilds at two colleges and leave out the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School is an inequitable provision of education.

**Mr Gardiner:** Some time ago, I became concerned when it was announced that there would be a 10-month delay in the newbuilds for Portadown College and Lurgan College. I wrote to the Minister of Education to enquire about those delays. At the time, I was concerned that many capital-spend projects across the Northern Ireland Departments were being kicked into the next financial year in a concerted effort to cover up the growing black hole in the Budget.

At first, I suspected that Portadown College and the Lurgan College newbuilds could be victims of such a move. In response, I received a categorical assurance from the Minister of Education that that was not the case. I put that response on record in the House today because it is important that the House record the facts. I say that because, since last November, there has been mounting evidence that the budgetary black hole has grown to alarming proportions, despite repeated denials by the Finance Minister.

It is conservatively estimated that there is a deficit of at least £1 billion. Only last week, the Finance Minister wrote to the Finance Committee and suggested a rewriting of the priorities in the Programme for Government, for which my colleague David McNarry has been calling since last October.

That means that the budgetary pressure to delay Government capital-build projects must logically be a factor in Government thinking and possibly even in planning. It is for that reason that I want the Minister to reassure me that delays in the Portadown College newbuild project are in no respect due to pressure from the Minister of Finance and Personnel to save money and to kick capital-build projects into next year.

5.15 pm

In her reply to me last October, the Education Minister said that the amended Lurgan College newbuild, which incorporates the historic old building, had now passed the economic appraisal stage at the Department of Education and has been sent to the Department of Finance and Personnel for final approval. That was good news for Lurgan College, Lurgan town and the surrounding villages.

However, she also told me that the amended Portadown College newbuild was still under consideration in the Department of Education's economic appraisal stage. She told me that that was because it would involve the expenditure of additional money and that it would have to pass that stage before it could be processed. The Minister told me that that additional expenditure would have to be justified under both the economic-appraisal guidance directions and 'The Northern Ireland Practical Guide to the Green Book' before it could progress to the next stage.

In her letter, the Minister added that the SELB resubmitted the economic appraisal for the Portadown College newbuild for the third time on 24 November 2008 and that it is currently being appraised by the Department's advisers. The Minister told me that the Portadown College scheme needed to be able to prove that it represented value for money, given that there was an increase in the capital expenditure involved. That was some four months ago, so I will listen with interest to the Minister's comments today to find out what stage the process has now reached.

That situation raised another issue. Why could the relationships between the SELB and the Department of Education not be adequate enough to ensure that those delays were avoided? Did the SELB have to rewrite its building specifications because it failed to provide adequate building specifications to the Department in the first place? Alternatively, did the Department fail to respond quickly enough to the SELB? I would like the Minister to answer those questions.

Whatever the cause, it is my constituents and their children who have suffered as a result of those delays, and I object to that situation in the strongest possible terms. I hope that the Minister will sort the problem out quickly so that both Lurgan College and Portadown College get the badly needed newbuilds that they so deserve.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this Adjournment debate on the Portadown College newbuild, although I note that some Members have used this opportunity to expand the topic of the debate to include newbuilds in the Upper Bann constituency.

I had the privilege of working with Portadown College in my previous job in the Health Service. The college carries out extensive outreach work across the community and is well respected as a centre of education excellence in the constituency. I, therefore, lend it my support.

Over the past two years, I have written to the Minister to try to tie down a time frame and a date for work to commence. I agree with Mr Gardiner; we need to find out where the gridlock occurred. Did it happen at the education board or at departmental level? Given

that answers vary from time to time, we need a direct answer to that question.

It would also be pertinent if the Minister could tell us what impact the economic downturn is having on the school-building programme. Yesterday, I specifically asked the Finance Minister about projects to rebuild schools, and, unsurprisingly, he said that that was a matter for the Minister of Education.

Will the Minister offer some reassurance about the delays that exist across Upper Bann and, particularly, the delays with the newbuild at Portadown College? Will the money for that newbuild be there in the next financial year? Many people in the construction industry, never mind children and parents, are depending on it.

I spoke to Mrs O'Hare, the principal of Portadown College, some months ago. She expressed concerns that, coming into the GCSE and A-level exam period, there was not enough accommodation for all the exams to take place on site; that is a matter of grave concern to us all. Young people are under enough pressure and stress without their school accommodation being unfit for purpose.

I concur with those people who are trying to tie down a definitive date on which the work will start. I support Mr Simpson's comments about the school's excellence, outreach work and location. Given the school's proximity to the playing fields at Bachelors Walk, I urge those involved to consider working alongside Craigavon Borough Council on shared facilities; that is partly the way to go.

I note Mr O'Dowd's comments about Craigavon and wider planning for the future, but surely the sustainable schools policy is something on which the Minister and the Department should be taking a lead and giving some direction. I am sure that the Minister is aware that the Catholic-maintained sector in Upper Bann is already at an advanced stage of looking at collegiate-type models with the amalgamation of junior high schools and the senior high schools of St Mary's and St Paul's, and Our Lady's Grammar School. I would be interested to hear the Minister's view on that because, surely, schools need direction when they are planning.

Will the Minister comment on the viability of Portadown College? I understand that its feeder schools are in the Newry and Armagh constituency as well as in Upper Bann and that there is always a fight for places. I support the Minister's view that we should provide educational access for all children, regardless of their social and economic background. We should provide all our young people with an excellent education.

St Teresa's Primary School in the Lurgan area has been on the agenda for a work plan for considerable

time, and the Department and the SELB are batting the ball around in respect of business cases and where the fault line lies. I would be pleased if the Minister would outline whether the money is there and when that work will start.

**Mr Moutray:** I congratulate my friend and Upper Bann colleague, David Simpson, for securing the Adjournment debate on such an important issue.

My three children and I have benefited from an education under the Dickson plan, and I have been a consistent advocate of the plan. Along with other local schools, Portadown College has helped to deliver an excellent academic experience for generations of young people. The Minister may have concerns with some aspects of the Dickson plan, but it enjoys the approval and support of the overwhelming majority of people in the area.

I add my voice to the points raised by David Simpson in his opening speech on the proposed newbuild for Portadown College. The case for a newbuild on the existing footprint of the school speaks for itself. I welcome the agreement of the Minister and the Department that a new school ought to be built. The real issue is: which is the better option? Any fair-minded observer would conclude that the case for building on the existing footprint has been made conclusively.

The benefits of that option are as follows: it is cost effective, in that any difference in cost between the options is minimal; it preserves the college's location as a prominent feature of the area; it does more to minimise traffic-flow problems; it preserves the sporting side of the college in a much more continuous way, and, crucially, it also preserves the playing fields as an integral and unified part of the college; it does more to aid relationships with people who live close to the school; and it avoids the potential personal-security issues that may arise from the current proposal. These are telling arguments, and the Minister should give them serious consideration.

On another point, the Southern Education and Library Board and the board of governors of Portadown College have serious health and safety concerns over window frames that do not hold glass securely. It is imperative that the issue of location is resolved; otherwise expenditure in the region of £500,000 will be required to address that urgent issue.

I trust that the Minister will listen to the concerns that have been raised today, and, as a result, will act swiftly to progress the newbuild on the current footprint — and also the much needed newbuild for Lurgan College.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful for the opportunity to join with other Members, especially those from the Upper

Bann constituency, to speak about the need for Portadown College to have a newbuild as quickly as possible.

The impact and outreach of Portadown College in providing education extends beyond the constituency of Upper Bann. Many of the primary schools that supply pupils to Portadown College are situated in my constituency of Newry and Armagh.

I pay tribute to the principal, her predecessors and all the staff at Portadown College for the high-quality education that they have provided over many years. In providing such education, sporting achievement and the full remit of the educational curriculum, Portadown College has an excellent record.

It is clear that the school estate at Portadown College is in dire need of refurbishment and replacement. It has taken its place in the queue for many years. The board of governors, teachers, staff, parents and pupils have been very patient as they wait in expectation for work to begin. It is time for a clear statement of intent to be made to the House by the Minister.

I do not wish to make a political point, but the Minister and her predecessor and party colleague Martin McGuinness did not place much emphasis in supporting newbuild projects for grammar schools. The record of the Department of Education under their leadership confirms that. I want an assurance from the Minister that she will not allow her opposition to grammar schools — or her party's opposition to grammar education — to impact in any way on the logical case that has been put forward for provision of a newbuild for Portadown College. We have also heard the case for Lurgan College.

I am very happy to support an urgent rebuild for Portadown College, so that it can continue its outstanding record of providing high-quality education.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** I thank Mr Simpson for bringing forward this debate about the proposed major capital scheme for a newbuild at Portadown College. It affords me an opportunity to address Members' concerns about the progress of the project. I listened carefully to all who have spoken.

I reject the comments that were made by Danny Kennedy about my colleague Martin McGuinness, which were in poor taste and do not reflect reality. Mr Kennedy said that I am opposed to grammar school education, but nothing could be further from the truth. If Members read what I say carefully, they will find that I am asking that, for the first time ever, grammar schools make their excellent education available to all.

What I am opposed to is the inequality in the system, not to any particular part of the system. I ask that the Member not make inaccurate comments.

5.30 pm

In March 2006, a scheme was announced for Portadown College. However, in April 2007, the Southern Education and Library Board advised the Department that it wished to review the agreed economic appraisal to take account of the potential additional provision to be provided by the Sports Council and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL).

Mar is eol do Chomhaltaí, tá sé rithábhachtach go mbaintear úsáid mhaith as na hacmhainní atá ar fáil don Roinn Oideachais agus go dtugtar cuntas iontu. Tá sé tábhachtach mar sin go mbíonn gach breithmheas eacnamaíochta, lena n-áirítear an ceann do Choláiste Phort an Dúnáin, san áireamh.

As Members know, it is vital that the resources available to the Department of Education be put to good use and accounted for. It is therefore essential that all economic appraisals, including revised economic appraisals such as the one for Portadown College, be in line with the requirements of the 'Practical Guide to the Green Book', produced by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Equally, it is important that Departments work together, and all Members have told me that they want to see that happen. Members want DCAL and the Department of Education to work together, and I have pledged my support to that.

To date, three revisions of the economic appraisal have been considered by the Department's professional advisers. The need for further work was explained at a meeting between the Department and the SELB. Once the Department has agreed a revised economic appraisal, we will work with the Department of Finance and Personnel before putting the scheme forward to proceed with planning. I know that Members are interested in the area-based planning process. Full area planning will involve four related key components: area plans; asset management information; strategic investment plans; and project level appraisal, or economic appraisals and business cases.

The proposed education and skills authority will have operational responsibility for area-based planning and will work closely with educational interests, which will have an important role in the process. The Department will have a policy guidance and approval role. Full implementation of the approach will be taken forward when the ESA is fully up and running. I know that Members are concerned about the time that has elapsed since the scheme was announced. However, I emphasise the importance of ensuring that the principles of appraisal have been applied correctly and that the decision on how best to provide suitable accommodation for current and future pupils attending Portadown College is robust and presents value for money. The Southern Education and Library Board has

advised that the period of construction for the scheme is about three years. It is estimated that the replacement school will be completed by 2012-13 at a current market value of £15 million.

On-site work is progressing on 27 major capital schemes, and a further 74 major schemes are at various stages of planning; those schemes are being taken forward in conjunction with the relevant authorities. Approval for construction work to begin on those projects, and indeed on all capital projects, will be subject to the necessary planning and building processes being satisfactorily completed and the availability of resources in any particular year. Approval will be subject to, and take account of, departmental policies, including area-based planning and the sustainable schools policy. There is no question of our not having the resources for the capital projects that we have outlined. As I said, those projects will be subject to, and take account of, departmental policies.

I welcome the fact that a new school for Portadown College is central to the SELB's plans for Portadown and the wider Craigavon area. The aim is that Portadown College will work in partnership with the local further education college, the Portadown campus of Craigavon Senior High School. That will ensure that the full range of the entitlement framework can be delivered to young people in Portadown. Members know that I believe very strongly in collaborative working and in focusing on outcomes for pupils in an area rather than on the needs of individual institutions or buildings. That is the way forward for education. Many more schools are now engaged in innovative and creative approaches to collaborative working through the area learning communities, which represents a significant change. I sincerely hope that the proposed new facilities will represent a real resource for pupils, not just in Portadown College but in the Portadown area and beyond.

The Department was informed by SELB officers in December 2008 that Portadown College had withdrawn from the Craigavon area learning community due to "other significant priorities and planning challenges".

I hope that the school will have another look at that, because it is important that the 21 learning communities across the North function well. They are an important part of our education —

**Mr Kennedy:** Is that blackmail?

**The Minister of Education:** Of course it is not blackmail. In light of your earlier comments, please do not add insult to injury. It is part of the Department of Education's policy, and it is important that all the learning communities are given that role. We have to put children first, and I encourage all schools to play an active role in their learning communities.

Tá mé ag súil go mór leis an tionscadal a bheith críochnaithe sa bhliain 2013 nuair a bheas an fhoireann agus na daltaí — agus an pobal i gcoitinne, ar ndóigh — ábalta leas a bhaint as áiseanna nua-aimseartha le tacaíocht a thabhairt dá n-oideachas agus dá bhfoghlaím shóisialta.

I look forward to the completion of the project in 2013, when staff, pupils and the wider community will be able to avail themselves of modern, up-to-date facilities to support their educational and social learning experiences in the area.

**Mr Simpson:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Education:** Sorry, I have finished.

*Adjourned at 5.36 pm.*



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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 30 March 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Act on CO2 Advertising Campaign

*Motion, as amended, made [24 March 2009]:*

That this Assembly notes with concern the attempt by the Minister of the Environment to block the Department of Energy and Climate Change advertising campaign Act on CO2; further notes that the position is contrary to the targets set out in the Programme for Government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to remove his opposition to the Act on CO2 advertising campaign; and, mindful of the Environment Committee's vote of no confidence in the Minister of the Environment, calls on the Executive to launch a cross-departmental advertising campaign on climate change aimed at achieving the Programme for Government environmental protection targets.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I remind Members that on Tuesday 24 March 2009, a valid petition of concern was presented in respect of the motion on the Act on CO2 advertising campaign that was debated on that day.

Under Standing Order 28, the vote could not be taken until at least one day had passed. The Business Committee has, therefore, agreed that the vote should be taken as the first item of business today.

I also remind Members that another effect of the petition for concern is that the vote on the motion, as amended, will be on a cross-community basis.

*Main Question, as amended, put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 30.*

AYES

NATIONALIST:

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Dallat, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay,*

*Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

UNIONIST:

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Ms Purvis.*

OTHER:

*Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beggs and Mr Burns.*

NOES

UNIONIST:

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

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Moutray and Mr Storey.*

*Total votes 78 Total Ayes 48 [61.5%]*

*Nationalist Votes 32 Nationalist Ayes 32 [100.0%]*

*Unionist Votes 42 Unionist Ayes 12 [28.6%]*

*Other Votes 4 Other Ayes 4 [100.0%]*

*Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).*

12.15 pm

## SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I would like to inform the House that I will be absent tomorrow.

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Recent Visit to the United States

**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 First Minister and deputy First Minister's recent visit to the United States.

**The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):** A Cheann Comhairle, I apologise to Members for the late arrival of the statement in their pigeonholes, which was due to a delay in finalising the printing of the statement. I trust that all Members now have a copy.

I wish to make a statement on the visit to the United States of America that the First Minister and I made over the St Patrick's Day period. As Members are aware, the economy is the central focus of our Programme for Government as we seek to build a prosperous, fair and inclusive society. To that end, we have sought to maintain and deepen our special relationship with the United States of America in relation to inward investment, trade and tourism, and through political support for our institutions of government.

On inward investment, we had the twin aims of seeking to maintain and develop existing investment by American-based firms and to develop new business opportunities in the creative and information technology sectors. In the political sphere, we sought to develop a relationship with the new American Administration under President Obama, and with the United States Congress. We were determined to meet those aims and not to allow ourselves to be thrown off course by the futile and senseless attacks in Antrim and Craigavon. The future of our economy and our people is too important to be diverted by those actions, and we were pleased to receive the support of all party leaders for that approach when we met them on Tuesday 10 March.

In relation to our focus on investment, we were greatly encouraged by the positive welcome that we received and by the willingness of corporate America to look at inward investment opportunities here. We met a wide range of relevant people in Los Angeles and Washington DC, including those with an existing presence here. We met potential investors in order to highlight the opportunities that we can offer. Invest NI officials met representatives of Caterpillar and Seagate, and the First Minister met representatives of Allstate in Chicago. I am pleased to report that in even these difficult times, those companies remain committed to their investments here.

We jointly addressed a meeting of tour operators, members of the travel media and airline executives at a presentation that was organised by Tourism Ireland. We used that opportunity to promote here as a holiday

destination. That was the first time that the audience had been exposed to a specifically local message about the benefits of holidaying in this part of Ireland.

The First Minister and I also met industry leaders in the creative and information technology sectors, and we hope to make some positive announcements shortly. Furthermore, I can report that the Irish Technology Leadership Group — comprising businesses and investors based in Silicon Valley — has committed to host a conference to examine business opportunities here later this year. That is a significant boost, and we are delighted that the group has chosen Belfast as the location for its 2009 conference.

While the First Minister was in Chicago, I travelled to New York, where I met State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, who has committed \$30 million for here as part of a \$100 million European investment fund. I hope that that will be a spur for investments in local companies by providing another source of credit. In these times of global recession, business leaders and community enterprises have made it clear that access to credit is essential.

I was delighted last year to host a visit to Derry by Comptroller DiNapoli, who witnessed at first hand an area that has been the victim of a persistent pattern of deprivation. However, he also witnessed the enthusiasm, commitment and ingenuity of the people of my city. Given the historic lack of investment, it is an area pregnant with possibility and opportunity. It is an area in transition.

Those investment funds — and access to that capital — targeted towards those areas that are most in need, will deliver economic development, and harness the enthusiasm and ingenuity of local businesspeople. It will create and share wealth with communities in the North and investors across New York state.

We had a useful series of meetings with business leaders in corporate America, targeting not only key sectors that are already established here, such as information and communication technology (ICT) and manufacturing, but emerging sectors, such as life and health sciences and film production.

On the morning of St Patrick's Day, we addressed more than 400 guests at the bureau's annual business breakfast, where we promoted a strong corporate message, which was focused on a new mutually beneficial relationship with the United States. The audience included representatives of corporate America; members of Congress; the Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward; Micheál Martin TD, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs; the Speaker and representatives of all the political parties in the Assembly, as well as the full Policing Board and Sir Hugh Orde.

Throughout our visit, the First Minister and I delivered a powerful message to corporate America

that we remain an excellent investment opportunity and that we are very much open for business. We have no doubt that more US-based companies will take up the opportunity to invest here, and we are also confident that other positive news will emerge as a result of our visit to the United States.

Within the political sphere, we sought to develop further our relationship with the American Administration and Congress in Washington. The First Minister and I met leading Congressmen and women; the National Security Adviser, General Jim Jones; the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton; and President Obama. The meeting with President Obama at the White House on St Patrick's Day was highly significant in demonstrating the President's continued commitment to the peace process and that of his entire Administration.

We had a useful and constructive meeting, and the President reiterated his commitment to helping us to improve the economy. He confirmed that he will continue to take a role in supporting the development here. He also advised that he hoped to be in a position to announce arrangements for the new special envoy, and we look forward to that appointment. President Obama congratulated us for the stand that we had taken in the face of the recent violence, and he underscored his Administration's support for the peace process and the rule of the law.

At the Speaker's lunch on Capitol Hill, the leaders of Congress and the Senate heard President Obama and the Taoiseach commit themselves to supporting the peace process in the face of recent attacks. That evening, the Taoiseach and President Obama repeated that message in the White House.

The First Minister and I also had a meeting with the United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, which was followed by a joint press conference. Secretary Clinton is a long-time friend of all of us; we are incredibly fortunate that Hillary has been appointed as the new Secretary of State. For many years she has been a true friend of the peace process, contributing tremendously to the transformation that has taken place over the past number of years. She reiterated that the Obama Administration will remain engaged.

A key message throughout the visit was that we are moving forward and that despite the recent violence, the Executive and the Assembly have stood together in a partnership that has helped to solidify the political institutions. That was vital to us, and we were able to assure political leaders in the United States of the new determination of the Executive, the Assembly and our people that those opposed to the peace process will not succeed.

The community support for the peace process here was widely reported in the United States, and that helped to underscore our message that we had the

support of the vast majority of the electorate for our leadership and the institutions of Government. We were overwhelmed by the goodwill and support that we received in the United States and the commitment to work with us in support of the peace process, in building our economy and in furthering the special relationship, based on reciprocity and respect, between our two Administrations.

In the meantime, the First Minister and I are grateful to Ministers, the leaders from all parties and Members of this House for their support and we will, naturally, update the Assembly on progress in due course.

**Mr Shannon:** I congratulate the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on a successful trip to the United States; it is obvious that contacts were made. Especially in light of what took place in Northern Ireland just before they were due to leave, when two soldiers and a policeman were brutally murdered, it is important that the concerns and worry of people back home were conveyed to the President and to all the people whom they met in America.

Bearing in mind all the measures that the deputy First Minister outlined in his statement and the people whom he met, I believe that the trip was very successful, as it secured the assurance of some \$30 million in support. Goodwill exists, and Northern Ireland is very settled. I commend the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their leadership.

The statement refers to tourism and how it will be advanced. Will the deputy First Minister give some indication of how he sees the potential for tourism increasing? In light of the tremendous visit to the United States, will he also confirm whether an invitation to visit Northern Ireland was extended to President Obama, who is the leader of the most powerful country in the world? Such a visit would be important for us in order that we can reciprocate his goodwill.

**The deputy First Minister:** I thank the Member for his support. The issue of tourism did come up, and as I explained in my statement, when we were in Los Angeles, the First Minister and I addressed an audience that was made up of people who are important in the tourism industry. We were in a position to articulate strongly that the North of Ireland is a very important destination for US tourists. Tourism opportunities exist, and Tourism Ireland is working very hard to promote this part of our country.

The attendance at that meeting showed clearly the enormous interest that exists in our situation. As I also said in the statement, that meeting was the first time that those representatives from the tourism industry were able to hear from our locally elected politicians about the huge benefits of coming to our shores. The dollar has strengthened recently, so in economic terms,

many Americans will consider this part of the world as a holiday destination.

The visit was of tremendous importance, and our discussion with President Obama showed clearly that he intends to continue the long tradition of giving the support that we have received from the United States.

We offered President Obama an invitation to visit the North, and he declared that he was keen to accept that at an appropriate time in the future. Given the hugely difficult situations that the President is dealing with — for example, the US economy and the situations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq — it is obvious that we will have to wait for the opportunity to present itself. The President also said that he was very keen to visit because he had heard that the quality of Guinness is better on the island of Ireland than it is anywhere else in the world. He was looking forward to tasting a pint of Guinness in Belfast, and no doubt we will provide an excellent pint for him when he comes.

**Mr Molloy:** A Cheann Comhairle, I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for making a very powerful statement on their visit. Hopefully, all the Guinness that the deputy First Minister mentioned will be drunk in Strangford, the constituency of the Member who spoke previously.

It is very important for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to have reported back on the effectiveness of the visit. Will the deputy First Minister give us a report on the meetings that he had with representatives of the film and creative industries and outline the opportunities for their development in the North?

**The deputy First Minister:** We took part in a number of engagements and decided, for reasons of confidentiality and at the request of a number of the companies that we met, not to name those involved. It is important that we keep our word. The situation with a number of those companies is at a sensitive stage, and we are optimistic about good news in the coming weeks and months. However, until things are signed, sealed and delivered, none of that investment is in the bag.

We have to continue to articulate the case that we have a tremendous business opportunity to offer. For example, the Paint Hall in the Titanic Quarter was the location for ‘City of Ember’, which caused a bit of a stir back in the United States, particularly against the backdrop of the economic downturn and the way in which film companies are looking at the different facilities that are available.

The fact that we have an English-speaking community here, who are easy to communicate with, that we have a lower-cost environment and that Invest NI can offer incentives has attracted people to the prospect of coming here.

The Paint Hall in the Titanic Quarter, which is in four sections of approximately 16,000 sq ft, with 90-ft-high walls, is the ideal place for people to contemplate making a film or series of films. As a result of our discussions, we are very hopeful about the prospect that we will hear something in the not-too-distant future.

12.30 pm

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. There was quite a lot of discussion around the statement about the level of support that exists for the dissident republicans who carried out the attacks in Northern Ireland just before St Patrick’s Day. Did any of the discussions concern the link up and co-operation that exists between those dissident republicans and the mainstream Provisional IRA movement in the Province?

**The deputy First Minister:** I am not sure what that question has to do with our visit to the United States. However, it is quite clear that, in the course of the past number of years, we have seen a situation develop whereby, mainstream republicanism — for want of a better phrase — and the voters who support that mainstream republicanism, have accepted the peace process, in large numbers, as the best way forward.

We have to recognise that there will be people and tiny micro-organisations who are determined to destroy the peace process and to bring these institutions down. I am absolutely certain that they have no prospect whatsoever of success and that all of their actions are futile.

Many of these groups are divided among themselves: they talk about bringing about the reunification of Ireland when they cannot even unite themselves with regard to what they are involved or not involved in. Some of these groups are involved in very serious criminal activity, and when I spoke in the House last Monday, there had been a statement from the INLA distancing itself from the activities of the groups that were involved in the killing of the two soldiers and the policeman. That has not been denied. This is an organisation that was involved in the killing of three citizens in my city over the course of a 12-month period and is suspected of being involved in the killing of a sheep farmer in Claudy in County Derry.

Gerry Adams has spoken forthrightly about the individual acts of criminality that these groups are involved in, including extorting money from businesses in West Belfast and other parts of Belfast. I think that the lines have been drawn very clearly. There is absolutely no future for any of these groups. None of their activities will yield anything for them. We have to keep our nerve, stay united and continue to work to build the institutions that we know have the overwhelming support of the people that all of us in the Assembly represent.

**Mr P J Bradley:** I welcome the report of the St Patrick's Day events, and the events leading up to St Patrick's Day, in America. There is some good in the report. I notice that the tourism potential is referred to again. I have often said in the House that it has not been properly measured as it should be. The tourist potential for Northern Ireland in the southern States alone — from the Carolinas and that area — should be looked at more closely.

I want to make reference to another event that occurred in America on St Patrick's Day weekend, when a member of the Newry diaspora Dan Rooney was appointed American ambassador to Ireland. Dan has been very good to the Newry and Mourne area throughout the years, and his appointment is very welcome in my area.

I have one disappointment in that there is no reference at all in the 11-page statement to the undocumented number of young people from Ireland and Northern Ireland who are currently living illegally in the United States. There are an estimated 2,500 to 3,000 of them; the majority of whom are from County Fermanagh and County Tyrone. Did the deputy First Minister have any opportunity to raise the case of those undocumented people, either during the formal meetings or fringe meetings that the Ministers may have attended?

**The deputy First Minister:** The US is clearly an important market from which to attract tourists. From 2002-07, the number of US visitors to the island of Ireland grew by 27% to almost one million. In 2007, it was estimated that US visitors spent more than £536 million. In the same year, 118,000 US visitors came to the North — an increase in numbers of 13% and in revenue of 17% to £28 million.

The Member is right, Dan Rooney has been appointed by President Obama as the new US ambassador to Dublin. Dan Rooney is a huge supporter of our peace process, and has been over many years. Indeed, the First Minister and I met him and a group of his colleagues at Stormont Castle towards the end of last year. The fact that he has now been given such an important job will be a further boost to our efforts. Mr Rooney is hugely respected in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and throughout Irish America. His appointment is very important and clearly in our interest.

During one of the events, I told Dan Rooney that I sat up the night that the Steelers played in the Super Bowl. I also told him that I knew nothing about American football, but that I was delighted that his team won. At that, he put out his hand, shook mine, and pressed a Steelers badge into my hand, which I had to wear for the rest of the event.

The issue of the undocumented Irish came up consistently and persistently at many of the engagements in which we were involved. I believe that it is an issue

of concern to President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton not just in the context of the undocumented Irish; there are millions of other people — mostly Hispanics — who are in similar situations in the US.

There is no doubt that it is a matter with which the new Administration will grapple; however, yes, it came up at quite a number of our engagements. It is something that we would like to see resolved, because of the obvious pain and difficulty that it imposes, not just on people in the United States — whether from Derry, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Belfast, Dublin, Mayo or Kerry — but also because family difficulties occur, such as people dying. Christenings and weddings also take place, and for people to be unable to come home for such events, and to face the constant threat of arrest and deportation, is very worrying. Hopefully, the new Administration will find a solution sooner rather than later.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and for the work that he, the First Minister and other Members did over the St Patrick's Day period in order to market Northern Ireland, particularly for inward investment.

In the deputy First Minister's judgement, how does it affect our credibility in seeking inward investment in a global marketplace to have local Ministers wax lyrical about local jobs for local people? Does that not undermine our credibility and make us look rather insular at a time when we should be projecting ourselves as outward-looking and inclusive people who are open for, and welcoming to, business?

**The deputy First Minister:** I believe that we have a very outward-looking and inclusive Administration going forward. Business people and the Government in the United States welcomed us with open arms. There was tremendous support for the process in which we are engaged.

In our conversations, Secretary of State Clinton made it clear that the US envoy would be announced shortly, and that that may be accompanied by someone from the business community being appointed to work specifically on economic issues. If that happens, in effect, we will have not one envoy but two. That is a clear statement that the US Administration regard our process, and the development of our economy — which is the top priority in the Programme for Government — as very important.

There is recognition in the United States that, although we benefit from the presence of US companies through increased employment and support for the economy, many companies from this island also have businesses in the United States. In total, they employ as many people there as the American companies employ here on the island of Ireland. We can build on the strong links between the two countries. The engagement with

what happens here is not only political but intellectual and emotional.

In the past couple of days, and perhaps as long as a week after we left the United States, President Obama, when questioned about the situation in the Middle East, again brought the conversation back to what happened here and how other parts of the world can learn lessons from that process. I am not concerned about the situation in the business community, the Administration in the White House or other areas of the US Government because they are totally committed to helping us. They understand that what took place here was extremely important, and they are aware that the Executive have pledged to uphold equality by ensuring that people receive their full rights and entitlements, no matter who they are or from where they come.

**Mr Spratt:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement, and I congratulate him and the First Minister on their trip to the United States. There appears to be some positive news about tourism and investment as a result.

I appreciate that the deputy First Minister cannot name any companies, but does he hope for, or expect, any announcements of investment in the not-too-distant future?

**The deputy First Minister:** All Members are aware that the first anniversary of the investment conference will be in May. At the time of the conference, Ian Paisley was the First Minister, and the Administration put much work into it. Invest NI also did a tremendous amount of work, and the conference was enormously successful in demonstrating to a huge number of senior executives of US companies how the situation here had changed, and wonderful progress had been made.

I am hopeful, optimistic — and I will go even further by saying that I am confident — of hearing some extremely important announcements in the next number of months. I will not name anyone with whom we have been working or to whom we have been speaking, but the First Minister and I have been personally involved with some of the people concerned. We met them recently, not only in the United States of America but here in the North. As a result of those discussions, we are confident that we will hear good news.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I add my congratulations and gratitude to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their work, and to other Assembly Members who were present, in various capacities, in the United States for the period around St Patrick's Day. The fact that everyone was on message has had a significant and profound effect.

In reply to an earlier question, the deputy First Minister said that not only would the special envoy have an interest

in economic matters but that a specialist in that area could also be appointed. That is highly significant.

If it is accepted that the message was powerfully delivered, is the opportunity being taken to ensure that other countries, particularly in Europe, recognise and support the efforts to consolidate the peace process — efforts that are in contrast to the actions of those who are attempting to plunge us back into conflict and division?

**The deputy First Minister:** I should specifically mention the announcement by Thomas DiNapoli, the New York State Comptroller, of a \$30 million investment project, because it was made in the aftermath of the killing of two soldiers and a policeman.

*12.45 pm*

When we arrived in the United States, it was very clear to us that there was initial shock at the killings, and people could not understand the reasons for them. The killings came out of the blue against a backdrop of 10 years wherein political developments had moved forward to create the Assembly and the Executive, and to continue to build the hopes and aspirations of the people whom we represent.

For Thomas DiNapoli to make that announcement in the aftermath of those incidents was a very clear statement of support from someone in authority in New York state and of the confidence that he had in our process.

Standing with us at that announcement was Christine Quinn, who is the Speaker of the New York City Council, and, on the other side of us was Kerry Kennedy, who is a daughter of Robert Kennedy. All of them spoke forcefully about the need to support the process and to support the politicians going forward. Therefore, the DiNapoli announcement is a major boost for the local economy, and it is a vote of confidence in the North as an investment location.

As I said, the New York State Comptroller's emerging Europe fund will provide a total of \$100 million, of which \$30 million has been initially earmarked for projects here that focus on tackling deprivation and generating wealth for investors and communities alike. The establishment of the fund is a clear endorsement of the peace process and a clear indicator of the strength of the continuing relationship with New York. Despite the current challenge and economic downturn, it reflects the confidence that the New York State Comptroller has in the North as an investment location, and that is very welcome news.

In a couple of days' time, the First Minister and I will travel to Brussels to meet President Barroso and President Pötinger to hand over our response to the Barroso economic task force report. We know that there is a strong commitment from Europe to assist us going forward, and we look forward very much to that

event and to meeting other influential people in Brussels, as we attempt to bring about a joined-up and co-ordinated approach to the development of our primary objective in the Programme for Government, which is the pursuance of our economy.

**Mr I McCrea:** I, too, welcome the statement. Continuing on the theme of European investment, does the deputy First Minister agree that more could be done through our Executive office in Europe to encourage more investment in Northern Ireland? Furthermore, I have no doubt that the deputy First Minister is aware that unemployment figures are on the rise, certainly in my constituency, did he or the First Minister take any opportunity to tout for investment in the west, and, specifically, in my constituency — and his constituency — of Mid Ulster?

**The deputy First Minister:** Europe has an important role to play, and we all know and understand that the priority that Europe has given to the North of Ireland over a quarter of a century has changed somewhat in that its efforts now are mostly geared towards developing support for the process of reconciliation. There is also a determined commitment to ensure that we have important access. Indeed, given the fact that we are represented by the British Government at European level, it is fairly unique for President Barroso and President Pötinger to have made visits, and for the First Minister and me to have the sort of access that we have had. Indeed, it clearly indicates an intellectual and emotional engagement with our process, particularly as they repeatedly talk about the way in which our process can be held up to others as an example of how conflict can be resolved.

The unemployment situation is of tremendous concern to us all. For example, on the island of Ireland, the unemployment level in the North is just over 5%, while in the South it is around 11%. Recently, I told the Assembly that during our last visit to Brussels, senior officials were predicting that the unemployment level in Spain will reach 20% by the end of 2009. Hopefully, we will not come close to that level, but that prediction clearly demonstrates how the economic downturn is dramatically affecting many people on a global scale.

We must weather that storm, and in the course of our conversations we have recognised that the west is a very important tourist destination. As we move forward, and as the situation before us unfolds, it is understandable that business people in Europe and America will make their own decisions on the location of their businesses. That obviously raises a challenge for us in relation to infrastructure, and how we can make access to the west as easy as possible.

Following the investment conference last year, Comptroller DiNapoli accepted an invitation from Martina Anderson to visit the north-west. During that

visit he went to Derry, saw the Ebrington site, took a tour of the city and walked Derry's walls —

**Mr Kennedy:** That is more than the Apprentice Boys can do. [*Laughter.*]

**The deputy First Minister:** The Apprentice Boys do that every year, thanks to the good work of the Bogside residents and the Speaker of the Assembly. They have done tremendous work over the course of recent years, and the issue of marching in the Derry area is one that has been dealt with very sensitively.

However, Mr Ian McCrea, a Member for Mid Ulster, is absolutely right, and I particularly share his concerns in relation to the downturn in the construction industry. Indeed, construction west of the Bann has been affected particularly badly by the current economic situation.

The Executive are doing everything in their power to weather the storm and attempt to reduce the number of people facing the dole queue. When potential investors come here, we do not speak to them specifically about one area: our responsibilities cover the whole of the North. It is our job to promote the east and west of the North, and we do that at every opportunity.

**Mr Burns:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and for his and the First Minister's visit to the United States, particularly as it was against the backdrop of the terrible murders in Antrim and Craigavon. Will the deputy First Minister tell the Assembly a little more about the investment that might come from America, particularly in the area of biotechnology?

Furthermore, like my colleague PJ Bradley, I am concerned by the number of undocumented Irish people who are working in America illegally. Can we not create a better system of exchanging workers, rather than our people having to go there illegally?

**The deputy First Minister:** The work of the US-Ireland Research and Development Partnership is, we believe, an excellent example of the strong and developing relationship with the United States in the advancement of scientific research. I am very pleased to note — and I am sure that the Member agrees — that a project on diabetes will be the first to be funded under the partnership, representing an investment of £4 million, or \$6 million. Furthermore, an additional two projects have been recommended for funding in the field of sensor technology. Taken together, those projects represent an overall investment of approximately \$9 million, which will be funded jointly by the US, the Executive and the Irish Government. That collaborative approach is vital in the current economic climate, and helps support research and development as a means of driving economic development. It also demonstrates the potential that exists here. By working together, we can pool our research expertise and secure additional investment. That will support projects that will benefit

each of our jurisdictions and make a significant contribution to the well-being of all our people.

Due to the changes to our programme, we were not able to visit Silicon Valley. However, it was interesting to note that the people of Silicon Valley came to visit us in Los Angeles, when we were there. That was a powerful statement, because, if people were not interested, why would they travel from Silicon Valley to Los Angeles? At that stage, John Hartnett was able to make it clear that the Irish Technology Leadership Group was going to hold its conference here in the North in the autumn. All of that news is very encouraging.

A tremendous amount of work has been done on the undocumented Irish. There were insurmountable difficulties in the United States Congress with regard to the vote that took place, and things fell a bit flat. For all sorts of, I suppose, electoral reasons, no one expected that that issue would be resolved easily at a time when the US was in the middle of a presidential campaign. Now, in the aftermath of the election, I am sure that we are dealing with a President who recognises the difficulties that exist for the undocumented Irish, and for many others. That is a challenge for his Administration. There was a lot of discussion about the issue when we were in the United States, and everyone is waiting to see how the new Administration will deal with it. However, the issue is certainly on the radar screen, and appropriately so.

**Mr G Robinson:** I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their visit to the United States, and the deputy First Minister for the positive tone with which he has spoken today. In light of the closure of Seagate's Limavady plant, which resulted in 1,100 job losses, how confident is the deputy First Minister that the company will retain its Londonderry operation? Since there have been many job losses in Limavady and East Londonderry in recent months, will those areas be given priority for any future inward investment?

**The deputy First Minister:** I thank the Member — and all the Members — for their support. Prior to my visit to the United States, I visited the Seagate plant in Derry. To be quite honest, I am content that the operation there is secure and that it is a major aspect of the overall Seagate company in the United States. I have talked with the most senior executive in the company, and he was at pains to reassure us that the future of Seagate in the north-west is secure.

The terrible job losses at Limavady were, obviously, a source of concern to us all. It was particularly disappointing to those of us who live in the north-west — and the Executive — that so many people were thrown onto the dole queues. That represents a challenge for the Executive as we try to develop our economy.

Given those serious job losses in the Limavady area, it is incumbent upon all of us to rise to the challenge of

how we can provide much-needed employment, for not just Limavady, but for many other areas that have been badly affected. Coleraine, for example, has been badly affected. As the Member for Mid Ulster Ian McCrea has just explained, the economic downturn with regard to the construction industry is hitting south Derry and east Tyrone particularly hard. The challenge, therefore, is to see what we can do to combat those unacceptable figures.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I welcome the report from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. My question relates to Mr DiNapoli's \$30 million investment fund.

Will the Minister explain how that fund will be managed locally; for example, will a local sub-agent manage it? What return will Mr DiNapoli expect? How or when can a constituent of mine access some of that funding? Will the Minister also explain the difference between that fund and the Emerald Fund?

1.00 pm

**The deputy First Minister:** As I said, the investment from New York State is a major boost for the local economy and is a vote of confidence in us as we develop as an investment location. In the course of our visit, the First Minister and I recognised the importance of outlining to the representatives of all the businesses whom we spoke to the very real opportunities that exist here, not just for us in employment, but for them in investments.

With respect to the DiNapoli fund, businesses may attempt to secure funding from the banks, but banks will not fund every project, or they may provide only part funding. All day last Friday, I was involved in discussions with people in my constituency, and I met a number of businesspeople who had been turned down by local banks for what I considered to be fairly small loans. That has to be a serious concern. That fund, which was announced by the New York State Comptroller, will provide an additional source of funding that will sit alongside other sources that may be available.

The Member also mentioned the Emerald Fund. Comptroller Bill Thompson announced that \$150 million fund, which is a very sizeable investment, thereby showing New York City's commitment. There is a challenge to increase that fund, and there is ongoing and consistent work to do so. The target was to reach around \$750 million, and that is a much more difficult challenge, given the backdrop of the economic downturn. However, the fund is clearly up for that challenge, and we have met some representatives of the fund in the course of the past number of weeks and months, and we know that their work is continuing. Therefore, we will have to wait and see the outcome of all that in the coming period.

**Dr Farry:** I welcome the deputy First Minister's statement. Will the deputy First Minister outline any lessons that he has learned from the experience of the United States in overcoming divisions and trying to build a shared, integrated society that could be applied to the divided society here in Northern Ireland? Furthermore, given the encouragement from the Obama Administration to spread the example of Northern Ireland elsewhere around the world, will the deputy First Minister sum up what lessons from our own experience he thinks that Northern Ireland has to share with the rest of the world?

**The deputy First Minister:** I do not know how many Members have read President Obama's book 'Dreams from my Father' — I have read it and found that the most interesting aspect of it is that it was written years before he was even mooted as a potential candidate for the United States presidency. That book provides a tremendous insight into President Obama's view on racial divisions in the United States. Quite clearly, we are dealing with someone who recognises the importance of leadership and of uniting the people of the United States of America. History will judge him; it is too soon to make any judgement on all this now, but in four — or possibly eight — years, people will make a judgement on him.

In the course of our conversations with President Obama, the First Minister and I got the very real sense that he is someone who recognises that something very powerful and important happened here in the North of Ireland in recent times, and he recognises the importance of supporting every single Member of this House, our Executive, but more importantly, the people whom we represent — that is, the people who are out there facing all sorts of difficulties, particularly economic, at this time. During all our conversations with nearly every politician on Capitol Hill, and certainly with President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, they referred to the fact that they believe that lessons relating to other conflict situations throughout the world could be learned by examining how conflict was resolved here.

We all know and understand that because we were involved in important negotiations at different stages of our process, we have come to our position. Some of that might have been too slow for many people, and many people may have been frustrated and annoyed at the slow pace of progress, but progress was made incrementally, and we now have the inclusive Executive, which have been formed out of a recognition by all parties in the Assembly that, at some stage, there had to be a meaningful dialogue among parties to set it all up. That is exactly what happened. At some stage in those other conflict situations, people must recognise the importance of moving forward in a way that unites as opposed to divides.

I said earlier that the First Minister and I have just been speaking to a large group of American graduates who are visiting us for a few days. I told them about my experience and that of Jeffrey Donaldson: we were accompanied by people such as Seán Farren from the SDLP and Billy Hutchinson, and many others from the political process and all the political parties here when we were involved in discussions with the Shias, the Kurds and the Sunnis in a forest in Finland on two occasions over the course of 18 months.

I told them about my visit to Baghdad in July 2008, and I made it clear that this was not because I was pushing myself on the Iraqis; it happened because the Iraqi politicians decided that the only negotiators to whom they were interested in talking — throughout the world — were those from the North of Ireland and South Africa. We were accompanied by Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer, who were the chief negotiators for Nelson Mandela and F W de Klerk.

Clearly, the world is anxious to learn from our experiences, and all we can do is outline what we did. No two situations are the same. However, I believe that we have a duty and a responsibility — not least because we have been assisted by others ourselves — to outline our experiences, and people can then do what they want with them. We do not have a prescription for the resolution of their difficulties: all we can do is outline what we did, and they then have to reflect on that and decide whether they can benefit from it.

**Mr Dallat:** I join with other Members in thanking the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their trip to America. As someone who has gone in the past, I fully realise how difficult it is to attract inward investors while people are losing their lives at home.

I join with my colleague across the Floor and remind the Minister that six months before Seagate Technology Ltd in Limavady closed, there was contentment that everything in the garden was rosy. However, it did not turn out that way, and that constituency is totally devastated.

Although I understand that inward jobs are not attracted in just one day in the year, will the Minister — without letting everything out of the bag — convince people who have been waiting for two years, since the Assembly was up and running again, that, this time, it is for real, that the happenings of the past have gone and that our educated workforce can have the security of real jobs?

**The deputy First Minister:** The reaction of Members in the Assembly, and those in the Executive, to the events of the past couple of weeks will, I think, convince people in the community that this is for real. That sent a powerful message through the Senate and the Congress in the United States; it was a major talking point while we were there. People, from the

point of being really angry and annoyed that those killings took place, quickly gave way to the unity of purpose shown by all political parties in the Assembly. If it ever was for real, folks, it is for real now. The only way forward is the development of these institutions in the interests of the people whom we represent. That is why I said at that time that those involved in the killings needed to recognise the total and absolute futility of what they are trying to do.

They tried to destroy the peace process; to bring tens of thousands of British soldiers back onto the streets; to create mayhem in the political process and to bring about the destruction of the political institutions. They also tried to drive a wedge between the First Minister and me, and they tried to drive wedges among the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists and the rest of us so that there would be fallout, recrimination and a collapse of the institutions.

The fact that they did not succeed is to the credit of every Member of this Assembly. Real leadership was shown. Those people tested us big time, but our answer was very clear: we will not be diverted, deflected or threatened by anybody. We know that we have the overwhelming support of the people of this island and of the North.

When such events occur, one reflects on what happened. I was in this Building about a week after we returned from the United States. Many people — most of whom were visitors, rather than Members or people associated with political parties — came to me and said that they had been too complacent and were shocked by what had happened, but that they were tremendously encouraged by the way in which the political parties had responded to the challenge.

I saw that a representative of one of the groups was involved in a press conference last week. Those people talk about bringing about an end to British rule and the reunification of Ireland, but they cannot even unite themselves. How they can ever hope to reunite Ireland is a mystery to me. The only thing that will bring about the type of development that is supported by the people of Ireland and of the North is the continued development and promotion of these institutions — simply because these institutions were overwhelmingly voted for by the people of this island and of the North.

As we stand here, we all recognise that we were seriously challenged and tested over the past short while. I believe that we passed the test, but we should never be complacent again. There may be other tests in the future, and the only response to those tests is to do what we did in the past — stand together, sure in the knowledge that we will prevail in the end.

## **EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS**

### **Presumption of Death 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. As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Presumption of Death Bill today. Members will, of course, 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.

## **Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill**

### **Legislative Consent Motion**

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill dealing with the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, and the entering into of arrangements with the Young People's Learning Agency for England and the Chief Executive of Skills Funding.

Although it is not included in the text of the legislative consent motion because it is purely a technical matter, the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill also has Northern Ireland provisions in respect of a very specific aspect of student loans. I will deal with each of the three areas of Northern Ireland provisions in turn.

The most significant provisions relate to the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland by the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, which is known as Ofqual.

*1.15 pm*

By way of introduction, I remind Members that on 29 January 2008, the Assembly approved an earlier legislative consent motion on the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The purpose of that legislative consent motion was, through the Westminster Education and Skills Bill, to empower the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to regulate all vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

On that occasion, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) proposed, and the Executive and Assembly agreed, that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was best placed to take over the regulatory role for all vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, having had a long-established role in regulating national vocational qualifications.

I also remind Members that that was necessary at the time because the review of public administration (RPA) concluded that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), which regulated some vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, would be abolished and its functions transferred to the proposed education and skills authority (ESA). Although most of CCEA's functions will transfer to the education and skills authority, the Assembly agreed that it would not be appropriate for ESA to regulate vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, hence the decision at the time to use the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority as the regulator for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The full text of that Assembly debate is, of course, available in the Hansard report.

However, in December 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, published proposals for regulating and developing qualifications and assessment in England. One of the main proposals is that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is to be replaced by two bodies, each with distinct functions, all of which are currently carried out by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

The first body, the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, or Ofqual, will, effectively, become the regulator of vocational qualifications in England. The second body to be established is the qualifications and curriculum development agency, and it will be responsible, in England, for a range of non-regulatory functions that support the development of qualifications and curriculum. For Members' information, CCEA and, eventually, ESA, will carry out those non-regulatory functions in Northern Ireland for vocational qualifications.

That fundamental change in England required my Department to review the regulatory arrangements for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, effectively because the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority will no longer exist as an organisation. In light of the new circumstances, and to ensure continuity in the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, the only practical way to proceed in the short to medium term is for Ofqual to regulate all vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. That approach represents the closest possible equivalent to the regulatory arrangements agreed by the Assembly on 29 January 2008, to which I have referred. In fact, Ofqual would carry out the same type of regulatory functions that were envisaged originally for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

In addition, my Department conducted a public-consultation exercise on those proposed new regulatory arrangements for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The consultation ran from 11 August to 31 October 2008. There were 53 responses and strong support for the proposal that Ofqual should regulate vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.

At this stage, it is worth emphasising that under the proposals — and similar to the previous proposals — Ofqual would regulate vocational qualifications in only Northern Ireland. General qualifications such as GCSEs and A levels would continue to be regulated by CCEA and, eventually, by ESA. As was the case with the previous legislative consent motion to which I referred, this new arrangement does not in any way preclude future consideration of the regulation of vocational and general academic qualifications through a single regulator here in Northern Ireland. My Department and the Department of Education will conduct a

review of qualification regulation arrangements, probably during 2011.

However, it is important for the Assembly to agree to the proposed approach in the short to medium term, otherwise there is a real danger that vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland will not be regulated, and that would be to the detriment of individual learners and employers.

The second area of Northern Ireland provisions in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill relates to the creation of two organisations to replace, in 2010, the Learning and Skills Council in England.

The new organisations are the skills funding agency and the young people's learning agency. The powers that enable the Learning and Skills Council to make arrangements to provide services in Northern Ireland will be replicated for both the chief executive of the skills funding agency and the young people's learning agency for England.

No substantive changes have been made to the existing Northern Ireland provisions, many of which have not been used. However, one key provision that has been used, and will continue to be used, is the provision for the Learning and Skills Council to provide a range of infrastructure services to support the implementation of the new qualifications and credit framework across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is appropriate and necessary for those existing Northern Ireland provisions to be replicated in the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Bill.

The third area of Northern Ireland provisions in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill concerns a very specific and technical aspect of student loans. These provisions relate to the treatment of student loans under insolvency legislation and, in particular, individual voluntary arrangements. Individual voluntary arrangements enable an individual to enter into an agreement with a creditor, whereby the creditor agrees to accept less than the full value of the debt as satisfaction for the whole amount. That legislation is being brought forward in England, through the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill, to close the loophole that allows borrowers to write off or reduce student-loan debt by entering into individual voluntary arrangements, thereby bringing the legislation into line with how bankruptcy is treated in respect of student loans.

The provisions relate only to loans paid out of public funds in England. That is intended to prevent people who have English domiciles from writing off the loans under individual voluntary agreements while they are resident in Northern Ireland. I am considering similar proposals for people with Northern Ireland domiciles who are resident in England, but those

proposals will be brought forward through primary legislation for Northern Ireland.

The legal advice is that the Northern Ireland provisions in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill are so minor and technical that they did not need to be included in the text of the legislative consent motion. However, I am bringing them to Members' attention for the purpose of completeness. I hope that Members will support the motion that I have laid before the Assembly.

**Mr Easton:** Unfortunately, the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning are both ill, so I have agreed to speak on the motion in their stead. I thank the Minister for his explanation of the legislative consent motion and the background to the Bill. I do not plan to rehearse what Sir Reg has said; my purpose is to share with the Assembly the view of the Committee for Employment and Learning on the issue.

I commend the Minister on the willingness of his officials to come before the Committee to brief members on the workings of the Bill and the legislative consent motion. Officials appeared before the Committee on 19 March 2008, 2 July 2008, 19 November 2008 and 11 March 2009. The Committee also corresponded with the Minister a number of times with regard to the legislative consent motion and the Bill. The Committee agreed to support the legislative consent motion at its meeting on 11 March 2009, although that agreement is conditional.

As Members are aware, and as the Minister has outlined, a legislative consent motion is used when it is agreed that Westminster will legislate on an area that falls within the competence of the Assembly. On 8 December 2008, the Executive agreed to the inclusion of provisions for Northern Ireland in the Westminster Bill and for a legislative consent motion to be laid before the Assembly for Members' consideration. I want Members to understand that a robust process was followed. The Committee gave the matter careful consideration and did not agree to support the legislative consent motion lightly. Legislative consent motions should not be used in favour of producing legislation ourselves, except in particular circumstances where there is general consensus that they are necessary.

I have indicated that the Committee's support for the legislative consent motion is conditional, and I will now explain that. At an early stage of the Bill's development, the Committee highlighted its concerns about the provision for the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, the new regulator in England, to regulate vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. The Committee was unhappy that that regulation, which is a devolved matter, would not be formed on a local basis. Those concerns are shared by other Departments and Ministers.

However, having corresponded with the Minister and his officials and having learnt of commitments given by the Minister to his Executive colleagues that the situation will be reviewed at an appropriate stage, the Committee has agreed to support the legislative consent motion.

The Committee's view is that regulation by the Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator is an adequate temporary measure but that the regulatory function should be performed locally as soon as possible. The Minister has agreed to consult his Executive colleagues in the longer term about the possibility that the regulatory functions might sit with the education and skills authority. The Committee understands that that discussion will run in parallel with an independent review of regulating arrangements for ESA. The Committee's preference is for a single regulator for Northern Ireland in the long term.

The second part of the motion relates to the dismantling of the Learning and Skills Council for England in 2010 and its replacement by the skills funding agency (SFA) and the young people's learning agency (YPLA). Northern Ireland Departments require access to the services of the SFA and the YPLA. The provisions of the Bill in respect of those organisations that relate to Northern Ireland and which are covered by the legislative consent motion are technical and practical.

The Committee noted that, as a result of the Bill, a number of Northern Ireland Departments will be able to access SFA and YPLA services without having to approach those bodies through the Department for Employment and Learning. Members will appreciate the practical advantages of that provision.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing forward the motion. I appreciate that it arises from changes connected with the review of public administration and the establishment of the education and skills authority. A gap existed in the regulation of vocational qualifications, and the body that will address that is Ofqual.

I agree with Alex Easton: as reflected in the Committee's considerations, this is a short- to medium-term solution. Has the Minister proposals to establish a body in the North to regulate vocational qualifications locally?

The Learning and Skills Council for England is to be abolished and two new bodies will be set up: the skills funding agency and the young people's learning agency. In Britain, most of the Learning and Skills Council's budget will be transferred to local education authorities. However, before the establishment of that body, there existed the Further Education Funding Council for England, and, before that, the training and enterprise councils. The machinery of Government has done away with the Learning and Skills Council and

produced the two new bodies. I am concerned at the establishment of two new bodies and I want to hear what the Minister has to say. Most Members agreed with the reduction in the number of public bodies and quangos recommended by the review of public administration, yet now two new bodies will be created. Those two new bodies are orientated towards what is happening in Britain — particularly in England — and I wonder how the North fits into the picture.

I appreciate that the education and skills authority will be established as a result of the review of public administration and that regulation of vocational qualifications is important. However, this is something that we must look at, and I hope that the Minister will tell us how he will consider, first, the regulation of qualifications as agreed by the Committee; and, secondly, how the North will fit in with the operation of the two new bodies. The Minister also mentioned student loans, and an anomaly existed in respect of them.

Apart from those reservations, we support this short- to medium-term measure that will deal with the regulation of vocational qualifications. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister's statement; it makes good common sense — and it is good practice — to validate vocational qualifications.

The SDLP agrees to the legislative consent motion. The importance of DEL in the current economic conditions is crystal-clear. In the past, DEL did not seem to attract much interest; now, however, it has a crucial role in creating a base of skills to enhance skills in the community and to enable Northern Ireland to reposition itself on the island, in Europe and in the world economy. It needs to measure up to that and be seen to measure up to that.

*1.30 pm*

The Bill concerns the validation of qualifications, which is necessary. However, the validation body needs to be tuned in to the Northern Ireland experience and to the conditions that are relevant in our circumstances. The Bill enables funds to be paid for students who are studying and sitting exams in England. Clearly, that is necessary to enable student mobility and guarantee student choice. We agree with the approach taken by the Minister and with the consent motion.

**Ms Lo:** I thank the Minister for bringing forward the legislative consent motion, and I support it. I agree with the other Members who have spoken and with the Committee's concerns around the chopping and changing of the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland. There is a great and urgent need. I am glad to hear that the Minister is going to bring forward a review which will bring all qualifications together under a single regulator. We should not separate academic and vocational qualifications. For a long time we have said that the promotion of vocational

training is important for Northern Ireland. It will encourage more people to take up vocational training and to become technicians, engineers and electricians, to fill the big skill gaps that there are in Northern Ireland.

There is another issue around individual voluntary agreements (IVAs). I very much welcome the fact that the Bill closes that loophole. Student loans can be excluded from bankruptcy but not from IVAs. Apparently, in England, there is now a trend for people to opt for an IVA in order to try to get out of paying back their student loans. That is unfair to the majority of students who are struggling to pay back their student loans, often from salaries as small as £15,000 a year. I know that my two sons have been paying back their student loans for some time and I am sure that they would not want to let other students get out of that.

I read that the Bill will put the Sure Start children's centres on a statutory footing. I understand that there are two Sure Start children's centres in Northern Ireland. If that is the case, it would be very welcome. However, I am afraid that most Sure Start organisations seem not to be aware of that. Perhaps the Minister can confirm that?

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I thank Members for their comments. First, I will deal with Mr Easton's response on behalf of the Committee. I pretty much agree with what he said. He is correct, as are other Members, that the legislative consent motion provides short- to medium-term measures, necessitated because of circumstances beyond our control.

I will clarify a point that Paul Butler a Member for Lagan Valley made. The two bodies to which he referred are based in England and are not being replicated here. We could have access to their services, but we do not intend to replicate those services here. What we do have, coming back to a point made by all Members who spoke, is the intention, with the Department of Education, to conduct a review. That review will take place, probably in 2011, with a view to considering a single body. The terms of reference for that review will be made available in due course — they are not yet drafted. However, it has been made clear that the two Departments are going to carry out a review. This is not a final solution to the problem and we recognise that fully.

I know that a number of Members are concerned at the proliferation of bodies. Members did not have to read the speech that I have just read, and, if any of them were able to memorise and repeat a paragraph of it, they would be doing well. That whole area of activity is dominated by a very complicated structure. Anything that can be done to simplify that is in everyone's interests. I am fully committed to the upcoming review, but we have to do something in the short- to medium term. A vacuum cannot be allowed to

exist in which qualifications that are given to students and others in Northern Ireland could be challenged as not being up to standard. That is the main thing that we must ensure does not happen.

I appreciate the work of the Committee. I know how it feels, and there will be little difference between it and the Department on the issue. As soon as the terms of reference are drafted, we will share them with colleagues in the Assembly so that Members can comment on them. They will probably go to the Committee as a matter of course.

Sure Start does not appear to be affected in any way by the draft Bill, but, if I have missed something, I shall write to the Member.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill dealing with the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, and the entering into of arrangements with the Young People's Learning Agency for England and the Chief Executive of Skills Funding.

**Draft Health and Social Care (Reform)  
(2009 Act) (Consequential Provisions)  
Order (Northern Ireland) 2009**

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and  
Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** I beg to move

That the draft Health and Social Care (Reform) (2009 Act) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval to introduce the aforementioned statutory rule. Subject to the Assembly's approval, that rule will substitute:

"in Northern Ireland, the regional agency for public health and social well-being"

for:

"in Northern Ireland, Health and Social Services Boards"

in schedule 4(c) to the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001.

I shall explain why that amendment is needed. At present, article 42 of the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 requires midwives to give notice to the local supervising authority for the area in which they intend to practice. Schedule 4 to the Order currently defines the local supervising authority in Northern Ireland as meaning "Health and Social Services Boards".

The draft Health and Social Care (Reform) (2009 Act) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 provides that, in any legislation, references to "Health and Social Services Boards" will, after 1 April 2009, be construed as a reference to the health and social care board, except in relation to health improvement and health protection functions, where the reference will be construed as a reference to the public health agency.

Members will be aware that, when I announced my proposals for health and social care reform in the House on 18 February 2008, it triggered a major consultation exercise, which lasted until 12 May 2008. During that consultation process, the Department was actively involved in engaging with key stakeholders to discuss the proposals in greater detail and to canvass their views. Having listened carefully to the views of stakeholders and of interested parties, it was decided that the overall quality and safety agenda should come under the ownership of the public health agency.

As the provisions in the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 relate to the registration of midwives to practice in an area of work that clearly falls within the quality and safety agenda, it makes sense that the registration responsibility should rest with the public health agency, as that is where the director of nursing will be based.

Members will also be aware that the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 was

subject to rigorous scrutiny during its passage through the Assembly. It was very encouraging to see the widespread acceptance of the proposals in the legislation and the level of consensus that it enjoyed in the Health Committee and in the House. Given that midwives will now be required to provide notification of their intention to practice to the public health agency, it is necessary to amend schedule 4 to the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001 to reflect that position.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister explained the purpose of the draft Order, which requires affirmation by the Assembly before it can come into operation. It is a short and straightforward Order that relates to the registration of midwives. From 1 April 2009, when the new health and social care bodies come into operation, midwives will be required to register with the new Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being.

On 5 February 2009, departmental officials briefed the Committee on the background to the proposal. The Committee was content that the Department prepare the draft Order. The Committee considered the draft Order at its meeting on 12 March 2009 and recommended that it be affirmed by the Assembly. I support the motion.

**Mr McCarthy:** As has been mentioned already, if the Order works to provide a first-class service for the nursing and midwifery profession — and I have no doubt that it will — that is the way that we intend to go. I, certainly, support the motion.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I thank briefly the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee, other members of the Health Committee, Mr McCarthy, and, indeed, other Assembly Members for their support in the passage of this important piece of consequential legislation.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That the draft Health and Social Care (Reform) (2009 Act) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the House to take its ease for a few minutes before it proceeds to the next item of business.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Report of the Committee on Procedures on Inquiry into Assembly Questions

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on the report of the Committee on Procedures on its inquiry into Assembly questions.

The Business Committee has allowed 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 a motion and making a winding-up speech on a Committee report, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures will be allowed up to 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make his winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes in which to speak.

1.45 pm

#### **The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr Storey):** I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on the Inquiry into Assembly Questions.

The Committee on Procedures started its inquiry in September 2008 with the aim of investigating how to make Assembly questions more interesting, lively and topical. Given that the House is bulging at the seams, it seems that Members cannot wait for the report to be published.

I thank members of the Committee. The inquiry was lengthy, and the discussions and eventual agreement on each recommendation took place over several months. The individual and collective work of members has, I hope, resulted in a report and recommendations that will make some difference to Assembly questions in general and, in particular, to Question Time. The Committee began the inquiry by acknowledging that questions are a historic entitlement of democratic Parliaments worldwide. That entitlement allows Members to hold Ministers to account, to challenge policy decisions and to obtain information. Question Time is also seen as regulations, and all Members, Speakers and Ministers have a responsibility.

The report contains 10 recommendations, the first of which is that the number of listed questions should be reduced from 20 to 15. All Members will admit that 20 questions is a red herring, given that, in general, Ministers take five to six minutes to answer one question and the associated supplementaries. Each Minister would need nearly two hours to answer 20 questions. Fifteen questions may not be attainable, but it is a step in the right direction.

Our second recommendation proposes a change to the system for choosing questions. I will not describe

how the current system works, because Members are familiar with that. The Committee examined the statistical information contained on page 11 of the report. Those figures highlighted the fact that Members' questions ultimately had only a 1:6 chance of being answered. Therefore, over 80% of Members' work in writing and tabling questions amounted to wasted time. Although some Members might not support the reduction, we must remember that it is balanced by a reduction in the number of questions that they have to prepare.

Another proposal is that a Member from the same party should not ask the first question to the Minister. All members of the Committee agreed that questions to Ministers from his or her own party tended to be familiar and less challenging. Moreover, they agreed that such friendly fire did not enhance the experience and the theatre element of Question Time. The Committee considered that Ministers should expect Question Time to be challenging, and the recommendation attempts to ensure that the potential of real challenge exists from the beginning of Question Time. Members will accept the need to instil and inject such challenge into the House in order to ensure that Ministers are not given — or are not seen to be given — preference by any Member or any party.

A few moments ago, I mentioned questions on topical issues, and I want to explain the Committee's thinking on that matter. The junior Ministers presented some convincing evidence to the effect that, if the majority of questions covered only five broad areas, there was, perhaps, no need for fortnightly appearances. However, after considerable discussion, the Committee agreed that the public expects the First Minister and deputy First Minister to appear fortnightly.

Putting them on the same schedule, or rota, as other Ministers could be perceived as undermining their role. That outweighed any minor benefits that would have resulted from reducing their appearances at Question Time.

By the same token, the weight of evidence on the type and standard of questions for oral answer asked meant that the Committee could not justify a recommendation that the First Minister and deputy First Minister appear weekly. I would like to emphasise that point. If Members begin to ask questions covering all aspects of the work of the Department, then the Committee may have to reconsider that decision. Question Time will work only if Members have the will and the means to make it work: that means widening the time to Mondays and Tuesdays.

There were a number of reasons behind that recommendation — increased media coverage was just one of those reasons. The Committee was surprised at the viewing figures for 'Stormont Live', which regularly

gets audiences of more than 10,000 people: that is to be encouraged. We want to make the Assembly open and accessible, and the one way of doing that is through media coverage. After all, there is no way that we could get 10,000 people into the Public Gallery, even if they were pushing down the doors — and I do not think that that is taking place at the moment.

The second, and probably more telling, reason for the recommendation is that Members themselves admitted to losing interest in Question Time after around one hour. In its current format, with the level of prearranged questions and responses, sitting there for one and a half hours can be demanding. Splitting Question Time into one hour for two Ministers on Mondays and half an hour for one Minister on Tuesdays should help to ensure that there is, to some degree, a level playing field. However, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, and the Committee is willing to look at the issue again as it becomes clear how it is, or is not, working.

Finally, two slots will increase the opportunity for visitors to the Assembly to see what could, or should, be one of the more lively procedures that we have. Some members of the public cannot attend on a Monday, and the recommendation will increase the opportunities for the public to watch at least one Minister being held accountable by use of questions for oral answer.

The Committee heard from Members that there was dissatisfaction with the number of questions being answered by Ministers, and many suggested that the Committee considers time limits, as long replies take up lots of time that could be spent on getting through more questions. However, although both the Irish Parliament and the Ontario Parliament have time limits for the initial question, the supplementary questions, and the ministerial reply, the final view of the Committee is that time limits would not make much — if any — difference to the number of questions answered.

However, the Committee welcomes the Speaker's ruling that Members should not read their supplementary questions and agrees with evidence that shows that, if a Member has to read the supplementary question, it is too long. All the same, the Committee wants to send a very clear message to Ministers. Long-winded replies are not helpful, and in fact can be perceived negatively by the public and the media. If Members can curb their instincts to ask long supplementary questions, we hope that Ministers can do the same and answer in a full and concise manner.

That covers the recommendation for questions for oral answer; I will now quickly discuss questions for written answer. The Committee has been informed of serious concerns about the extent to which Ministers were answering questions for written answer on time. During its investigation, the Committee was reassured

to note that considerable work has been done by the Departments to improve performance. Nevertheless, the Committee will periodically review and call the worst-performing Departments to account.

The Committee was also very concerned to note that, despite having no method to calculate costs, certain Departments were able to refuse to answer questions on the basis of cost. Although the Committee is broadly sympathetic to the concept of disproportionate cost, it wants to see that concept used properly. For that reason, the Committee has recommended that all Departments urgently introduce a system of costing responses, similar to that which must be in place for dealing with freedom of information responses. We will, therefore, be keeping a close eye on developments in that area.

Finally, the report contains two recommendations on priority written questions. Based on statistical analysis and evidence from Members, it was apparent that the priority written answer system was being overused by some Members. Frustrated by late replies and, sometimes, the lack of detail in ordinary written answers, some Members resorted to asking for priority written answers. It is to be hoped that the improved performance of Departments will help the situation, but there are two new recommendations for Members to consider. The first is that only one of the five written questions a day can be a priority; the second is that Members should not use priority written questions to ask for a large amount of statistical or historical data.

That covers the recommendations in the report; I am confident that there is something for everyone to like and to dislike in it. I remind Members that a successful Question Time relies on the willing and sincere participation of Members and Ministers.

The Committee set out to address some of the deficiencies in the system, but it cannot and will not try to regulate Members. The Committee asks Members to try the new procedures; if they do not work, either in whole or in part, the Committee will review them. On that understanding, the Committee has already started work on the Standing Orders for Assembly Questions, and expects to see the changes introduced sometime after the Easter recess. I commend the report and its recommendations to the Assembly.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son na tuarascála seo.

I thank the Chairperson for his work in taking the Committee through its inquiry and for tabling its report this afternoon; I also thank the Deputy Chairperson for proposing the motion. I also thank the Committee Clerk and her staff and all those who gave evidence to the inquiry for their part in producing the Committee's report.

Sinn Féin welcomes the inquiry and the main findings of the report. Throughout its work — and in tandem

with last week's changes to Standing Orders — the Committee set itself the target of making the work of the Assembly and the Executive more accountable and more open, and by “open”, I mean public accessibility as well. The measures that the Deputy Chairperson outlined this afternoon will make this place more accountable and more open. He highlighted some of the changes to the number of questions and how they would be set.

The changes with regard to supplementary questions will address one of the issues. At last week's Assembly roadshow in Derry, the Ceann Comhairle heard about trying to make questions more topical; the process in which we are involved will do that. Reducing 20 questions to 15 could be called good housekeeping, but it reflects the reality that, every Monday, we never get close even to 15 questions, never mind 20. Reduction will be a practical alternative. The evidence from some Departments and from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was that the proposed changes will allow them to be better equipped and better organised to answer questions.

The Deputy Chairperson mentioned the role of the junior Ministers and the fact that they answer questions on their areas of responsibility. People should welcome that, because the junior Ministers work in their Department on a daily basis and are more available and better equipped to be more spontaneous, particularly when answering supplementary questions, than those who have to read from prepared texts.

The Committee was greatly impressed by media representatives' suggestion of splitting Question Time into two sessions. It is well known that the third ministerial slot — from 3.30 pm to 4.00 pm — on Monday is seldom covered by ‘Stormont Live’, so a move to Tuesday afternoon will provide better access. At the roadshow in Derry, it was made clear that many people watch ‘Stormont Live’ and are interested in watching and listening to Question Time. It may be that the debates in the House on a Tuesday afternoon do not inspire people to watch the programme, whereas Question Time might. We must respond to that.

2.00 pm

The deputy Chairperson referred to the things that people may like and dislike, and that is fair enough. The survey that was carried out by the Assembly Research and Library Service gave MLAs the chance to express their views on the issue of Assembly Questions. The Committee welcomed that approach.

The Chairperson and deputy Chairperson said, on a number of occasions, that the recommendations are not written in stone. The recommendations are not being undertaken on a trial basis; however, if there are any gaps, I have no doubt that the Committee will fill them. The underlying reason for the report and the inquiry is

to ensure that people feel that Ministers are being held accountable at Question Time and that the Assembly, as a body, is accountable, open and transparent. The report points us in the right direction. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

**Mr B McCrea:** Obviously, this cross-party motion has been deliberated on by our colleagues in the Committee on Procedures, and we, therefore, welcome the publication of the report. As a Member of the Assembly, the most heartening thing that I heard from the deputy Chairperson was that if the proposals do not work, they will be reviewed. I understand that people have tried their level best to move things forward, and we just have to see where they go.

At the risk of being slightly controversial, I find Question Time to be a bit formulaic. There ought to be a wee bit more spontaneity, because Members have a lot to say. Committee Chairpersons and Ministers are now getting on top of their Ministries, and they have quite a command of their subjects. Therefore, we should take the opportunity to question them. No doubt we will consider that issue.

Mr McCartney said that the debates on Tuesday afternoons bore some people. Some of my finest performances have been on Tuesday afternoons, but perhaps that is what he meant — that they were not very good.

I am always struck by the number of people who watch the debates. Politics are still important to the people of Northern Ireland; they still like to see their representatives answering questions, participating in debate and doing the business of Government. That is an advantage that we have over other jurisdictions.

By way of stimulating other discussions, I was in Washington recently, together with the Speaker and various other Members, and I took the opportunity to watch the House of Representatives and the US Senate in operation. In particular, members of the House of Representatives went in, said their piece in three minutes, finished, sat down and moved on. It was like a conveyor belt. That was quite interesting. Somewhat surprisingly, only one Senator is in the Senate at any one time. He or she gives forth to a television camera, and there is no one else there to ask questions.

It seems that we want to keep the real essence of democracy, whereby locally elected representatives are able to question those who have authority and responsibility. I implore the Committee to take a real look at that issue as things evolve. Let us see how things move on: we will suck it and see.

It is appropriate that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, as the joint heads of our Government, come to the Chamber regularly to answer questions, because they are not the same as other Ministers. They effectively lead the country, so it is right that they have

a broader remit and that we should ask them about what is going on. In that regard, junior Ministers — although we like to hear about the areas for which they are specifically responsible — are not a substitute.

I note that Professor Wilford suggested that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister should take part in Question Time more regularly, perhaps once a week. Again, we will just have to wait and see whether the recommendations work. A real point of engagement exists, whereby the people of Northern Ireland get a chance to hear the top people answer questions.

With regard to supplemental questions, I know that the Speaker tries valiantly to keep people on the topic of the original question, which is right and proper when dealing with specific ministries. However, it might be worth considering a relaxation of that so that people can expand on issues as happens in Prime Minister's Questions. I am sure that neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister would have a problem coping with that.

We welcome the publishing of the report and thank our colleagues for looking at the matter in detail. I look forward to some improvements — I might even get to ask the odd supplemental.

**Mr O'Loan:** The inquiry is important and reflects a general concern that Question Time is not working properly. Indeed, I have heard a rumour that cardboard cut-outs of Members will be placed on Benches to provide some semblance of activity and interest.

**Mr Elliott:** I hope that the Member is referring to cardboard cut-outs and not to blow-up balloons.

**Mr O'Loan:** Each party can make its own decision on that.

Question Time is fundamental to the democratic process: it is about the accountability of the Assembly. If Question Time is not working, or cannot be made to work better, there is a question mark over how well our democratic system is serving the public need. As a devolved region, we are limited in what we can do, but we allow ourselves to be too constrained by that. We need to improve our political dynamic, which means breaking out of the straightjacket that we often impose on ourselves. We need to use every mechanism open to us; our North/South and east-west relationships, our membership of the EU and our relationship with the United States. We need to use all of those relationships to punch above our weight, and if we make our Assembly active and political, our Question Time will rapidly reflect that. That is why we need to take the inquiry very seriously — it is not just about procedures, it is also about the fundamental politics of Northern Ireland.

The report must not be seen as the last stage of the process — it is a tentative first step. We need to do a lot more to make our Question Time more lively and

challenging, and we need questions that are much more impromptu, topical and unscripted. That also means that we need answers that are impromptu, topical and unscripted. In the existing system, our Ministers could do a lot more for us in that regard, particularly when answering supplementary questions — it is time that they threw away the script. Our Ministers have been given a job to do and are supposed to be on top of their brief. It is perfectly appropriate, desirable and necessary that Ministers think for themselves and react to questions. Supplementary questions are the nearest we have to impromptu questions, so let our Ministers deal with them in an impromptu fashion.

I want to make a procedural point about how the Assembly addresses a report such as this. We are being asked to approve a report with 10 recommendations. It is conceivable that Members might like some of the recommendations and might not like others, yet we are being asked to accept or reject the whole report. I did not support one of the recommendations during Committee discussions, but I would not divide the House on it. However, as a general point about how the Assembly deals with such reports, there is an issue about how the Committee addresses the individual recommendations.

I will make a few comments on some of the recommendations, particularly those on oral questioning. I welcome recommendations 1, 2 and 3, the reduction in the number of questions to 15 and the selection of the Members ahead of the selection of the questions — a double shuffle. That will help, because it reduces a lot of the nugatory work and means that the questions will be placed nearer to the time that they are answered. I have some concern that the random process might lead to the SDLP, with 16 Members from the total 108, having no Member selected to ask a question to a particular Minister on some occasions. However, let us see how that works out in the random process.

I particularly welcome recommendation 4, which states that there is to be no change to the rota for the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I think that the First Minister and deputy First Minister overreached themselves by that attempt to reduce the number of occasions on which they come before the Assembly. I welcome the fact that Democratic Unionist members, in particular, spoke out strongly against that in the Committee. I do not recall Sinn Féin members expressing any significant view in relation to that, either publicly or in the Committee. The Committee was clear in its ultimate view that there should be no change there.

I have some concerns about recommendation 5, which will allow the junior Ministers to speak on behalf of their seniors. I see that recommendation as part of the same issue — an attempt to reduce the accountability of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I have concerns about that. We will see how it works out in

practice, but I hope that we do not have occasion to come back to express those concerns again.

**Mr Neeson:** I want to thank the Committee Clerk, her staff, the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures for the way in which they have steered the Committee through the inquiry.

The report is very timely. It is widely believed that Question Time, as it exists presently, is tedious, particularly compared with Question Time in other places. Mr Speaker, you may remember our experience at the Parliament of Canada in Ottawa, and how Question Time was conducted there.

The Committee undertook a very wide and varied consultation on the issue. That consultation included members of the public, elected Members, and members of the media. As a member of the Assembly Commission, we are very committed to developing outreach for the Assembly to get greater participation of the community, and I believe that the report makes a major contribution towards that aim.

As a Committee, we recognised that the present timescale for submitting questions is too long. We also recognised that the tabling of 20 questions is too many and that the maximum number of questions answered in any one session is normally five or six. Under the proposed system, 15 Members' names would be drawn in a random shuffle, and questions would be drawn in the same manner, seven working days in advance of Question Time. By so doing, it is hoped to make the questions slightly more topical. The fact that questions were submitted so far in advance that they had lost their topicality was one of the big issues that the Committee considered.

The Committee felt strongly that the present rota for the First Minister and deputy First Minister should be retained. The proposal put forward by OFMDFM to reduce the number of appearances not only undermined the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister but would have undermined the role of the Assembly.

We also appreciated the role of junior Ministers, and in that respect, we have recommended that they could be called upon to answer questions that are relevant to their own portfolio, but not as a substitute for OFMDFM.

I am glad that the First Minister has joined us for this important debate.

The Committee also recognised the potential of Question Time in garnering public interest. For that reason, we have recommended that Question Time be split over two days. That will allow for the live televising of all ministerial Question Times.

These recommendations are, of course, open to review. When the devolution of policing and justice is brought forward, for example, that will be a point at which we would need to review Question Time.

2.15 pm

I have a very serious concern about questions for written answer. I believe that some Members of the Assembly abuse the system — they ask questions simply for the sake of asking questions. Members must consider not only the cost of carrying out that exercise, but also the time that is taken up by senior officials in devising answers. I ask Members seriously to realise the cost implications of that exercise.

The Committee spent considerable time going through the report, and I believe that there is now a major opportunity to make the Assembly even more relevant to the community at large, which is why I fully support all the report's recommendations.

**Mr Speaker:** Just before I call Lord Browne to speak, I know that some Members have individually raised the issue about what will be the procedure after today. After today, whether the motion is agreed or not, the individual new Standing Orders will come to the House, where every individual Standing Order will be voted on, or be grouped, as appropriate to the Standing Order. At that stage, Members can propose amendments to those Standing Orders. That is just to clarify the issue, because I know that Declan O'Loan raised the issue, as did other Members. That is just to clarify it once and for all.

**Lord Browne:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would, first, like to thank the Chairperson and Committee staff for their dedication and patience in the preparation of this very detailed report. The Committee has undertaken an extensive inquiry into questions to Ministers for oral and written answer, with a focus on evaluating the effectiveness of current procedures and making recommendations for improvements.

As the report states:

"The right to ask for information from and to hold Ministers to account is an essential and historic entitlement of parliaments the world over".

As in the House of Commons and the House of Lords, one way that MLAs can exercise that right is through ministerial questions, which do place a duty on Ministers to explain and defend their decisions and the actions of their Departments.

I think that many Members would agree that Assembly Question Time could be improved. In evidence to the Committee, Professor Wilford summed up the position by stating:

"It is undeniable that Oral Question Time, however it is styled, is a centrepiece of each sitting of the relevant House. Whilst it takes up a relatively small proportion of a House's time — in NI's case approximately 12% of the weekly plenary sessions are dedicated to Ministerial Question Time — it tends to attract a disproportionate amount of media and public attention."

Indeed, the Committee observed that there was a perception among MLAs that Question Time in the

Assembly had, sometimes, been less exciting than it should be, and that it lacked spontaneity.

**The First Minister (Mr P Robinson):** I am grateful to my noble and learned friend for giving way, and I am grateful for the remarks that he is making, because they lead nicely to a marker that I wanted to put down in the Assembly.

First, the main purpose of Question Time should not be to entertain the press or, indeed, the public: it is for the imparting of information. However, there is a particular issue to which I want to refer. I understand from the Speaker's comments that, in general terms, the purpose of the debate is almost like a Second Reading debate in which we deal with the principle of the report, and I am content with that.

However, it is just when the next stage comes, to alert the Committee on Procedures, if it is drafting the specific Standing Orders, to give effect to the proposals contained in the report in relation to recommendation 5, which relates to the role of junior Ministers in answering questions.

For some reason — and I am not sure, because I have not followed the debate — although the report was leaked to the BBC, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister could not get a copy from even the Printed Paper Office in the House. So, it seems that the BBC is more relevant to these matters than OFMDFM. However, the report specifically indicates, in recommendation 5, that the junior Ministers could answer oral questions on the basis of having:

“specific responsibility... as outlined by the First Minister to the Assembly on 11 June 2007.”

Why on earth would the Assembly want to peg itself to the specific duties that the First Minister gave junior Ministers on 11 June 2007? The departmental duties of the junior Ministers have since changed. Therefore the recommendation should refer to duties that have been given to junior Ministers at any relevant time rather than specifying 11 June 2007. I am grateful to my colleague for accepting an intervention.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute to speak.

**Lord Browne:** I thank the First Minister for his intervention; I am sure that the Committee will take his wisdom on board.

A survey of MLAs showed that Question Time was fulfilling only part of its role. Before considering how Question Time could be improved, the Committee examined the reasons for its existence. We concluded that Question Time does more than simply hold Ministers to account: it challenges the ministerial function; it is a proving ground for Ministers; it highlights issues of public importance; it gives Back-Benchers an opportunity to raise their profile; it facilitates the underscoring of

certain party-political views; and it allows Members to raise vital constituency issues and concerns.

As noted in the report, the Committee agreed that the theatre element of Question Time, so evident in other Parliaments, was missing from the Assembly to some extent. Although it is acknowledged that the theatrical element must be carefully managed, it would create interest and appeal to the public and the media. It is a tool that can be used to engage with various groups, such as young people, that might otherwise prove difficult to reach.

The Committee acknowledged the important role of the Speaker in Assembly questions, particularly in Question Time. I thank the Speaker for his help and for his submission to the Committee, which proved extremely useful.

I do not intend to speak about every recommendation because each is designed to improve the business of the Assembly. However, I remind Members that the recommendations are not set in stone and can, after a reasonable period, be reviewed and, if necessary, altered.

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

**Lord Browne:** I support the report.

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh maith agat. Ní raibh a fhios agam go raibh mé le labhairt. I was not aware that I was due to speak, but I am glad of the opportunity to do so. I have a brief anecdote that relates to a recommendation on asking questions in two languages. Some Members ask a question in Irish first, and the translation into English wastes some of Question Time.

Similarly, one Member likes to speak Ulster Scots. On a certain blog, a member of the public suggested that the Member be allowed some leeway because his Ulster Scots is more comprehensible than his English.

In general, questions should be short and concise. Some of the Ministers' answers —

**Mr B McCrea:** I am intervening to give the Member a chance to gather his thoughts. The Member is one of the more colourful characters in the Assembly, and I want him not to hold back but to give full throttle in demonstrating what an exciting opportunity Question Time could be.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute to speak.

**Mr Brolly:** I have little to add to what I said; I wish that I had. However, I could tell the story again. *[Laughter.]* Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Elliott:** I put on record my thanks to the Committee and its staff for their proposals. The review was necessary because some procedures were not working properly.

That is not to say that it will work properly after the proposals are implemented. Nevertheless, they are a huge improvement. I also appreciate the Speaker's clarification about what happens next in the process, because some Members were unaware of what will happen and expressed concern. Hopefully, the process will now take the form that was intended by the Committee.

I am interested in Mr Brolly's assertion about different languages. Sometimes I am quite pleased to hear other Members' speak in their Irish tongue, because then I do not know what they are talking about. That pleases me more than when I do know what they are talking about.

I am concerned that the whole procedure of submitting questions can be abused at times, in the sense that the questions are always repetitive. In fact, I feel privileged when I see how well Ministers deal with them. They do not simply refer back to a certain question, but give an answer in full again. They are not required to do that, but they are quite consistent in doing so.

Questions for priority written answer also need careful consideration, as the system is abused. Some are not, I believe, really questions for priority written answer. Furthermore, the responses require a range of information that cannot be gathered in one or two days. I do not believe that that system is being administered properly, but perhaps the Business Office can look at that. I hope that there is some progress on that issue.

The main issues relate to the earlier recommendations for Question Time. We have talked about the issue of drawing 15 Members' names, and of those Members posing a question seven days before the Minister appears before the Assembly for Question Time. That is good, and it is more efficient and effective for the Chamber and for the Assembly.

The First Minister, who has just left the Chamber, said that Question Time is not a stand-up show for the press but a way of getting information; however, it is not the only way. There are other ways, and it is not the only thing that Question Time is used for. This is a debating Chamber, and that is what we need to do. We need to be able to debate these issues and try to get that information out to the public.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member clarify that there seemed to be some difference between what the First Minister said and what Lord Browne said, in that there is an issue about showing people that we are at work and that there are plenty of ways of getting information, through questions for written answer and debates, among others? However, the real purpose of Question Time is to perform a bit of theatre, to show people what we are about, and to hold Ministers to account.

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

**Mr Elliott:** I have tried to touch on that. Question Time is about a series of issues. It is not simply about getting information, but it is obviously used by different Members and Ministers in different ways.

The issue of serious and significant current topics needs to be looked at when tabling questions for oral answer. If Members have to table their questions seven working days in advance, it does not allow for the option of posing a question that is important and current to that day. There should be an option to allow Members to table such questions for oral answer, and I hope that the Committee can look at that issue in the very near future.

The Deputy Speaker is looking at me, because my time is nearly up, so I will leave it at that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question Time will begin at 2.30 pm. Therefore, Members may take their ease for a few moments.

2.30 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

#### Alcohol-Related Health Costs

1. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the average annual cost of alcohol-related illness, accidents and injuries.  
(AQO 2406/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** A 1998 report, undertaken by my Department, concluded that alcohol misuse cost Northern Ireland approximately £770 million per year. Of that, £25 million related to the alcohol-associated treatment costs to the Health Service, in relation to beds and general practice, and £64 million related to road-traffic accidents associated with alcohol. My Department intends to update those costs over the coming months.

**Mr McCausland:** I welcome the fact that the Minister intends to update those figures, as they are 10 years old. Furthermore, I am sure that the figure that he believes to be correct will be much higher today.

Does the Minister agree that in addition to the financial cost, there is a huge social cost in relation to the effects of antisocial behaviour — much of which is fuelled by alcohol? Does he also agree that there are many other contributing factors; not least in relation to the liberalising of the licensing laws, the cost of alcohol, advertising and the impact of the media? The problem must be addressed through a coherent and comprehensive strategy for alcohol. That strategy should not only deal with underage drinking or some other issue, but must embrace the problem in a holistic way.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I agree very much that that is the approach that must be taken. Indeed, that is the approach that the Department already takes through the 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006-2011'. That strategy was published in 2006, and I am continually examining and reviewing it.

The Member is also correct about the social costs of alcohol misuse. Indeed, there are strong correlations between it and domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual health, unintended pregnancies, and so on, in

addition to the more normal correlations with antisocial behaviour and traffic accidents.

It is not my view that alcohol should not be drunk, but there are clearly safe limits, and that is the message that the Department is continually trying to put across. That message is about safety and drinking alcohol safely. Tobacco cannot be smoked safely, but alcohol can be safely consumed. However, on the one hand, we have the alcohol industry trying to make profits by selling as much alcohol as possible, and on the other hand, we have the Health Service trying to forward key messages about safe drinking. One reason for the establishment of a public health agency is to take over the promotion of those key messages.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail how much his Department has spent on combating and reducing alcohol abuse and alcoholism? How does that compare with other countries in the European Union?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am happy to write to the Member on those points of detail.

**Mr McCallister:** Given the events in the Holylands area of South Belfast on St Patrick's Day this year, does the Minister agree that alcohol misuse causes so much trouble? Furthermore, does he agree that the universities need to work very hard to address that issue? Moreover, will he agree to participate in the stakeholder forum that has been called for by his colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning to address the issue swiftly?

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I very much agree, and I am happy to participate in the stakeholder forum. Indeed, I already indicated as much to Reg Empey.

The Holylands area is in my constituency of South Belfast, and antisocial behaviour — fuelled largely by the unsafe consumption of alcohol — has been a perennial problem for residents who live in that area. However, despite many efforts, we seem to be unable to address the issue. The problem has been caused by a number of factors, including poor planning and the way that that planning has been implemented, the use of houses in multiple occupation and the huge increase in population as youngsters are crammed into the area cheek by jowl, effectively creating — as far as the universities are concerned — an unwelcome nuisance neighbour.

In other cities, universities are an advantage; however, often in South Belfast, Queen's University is, frankly, a poor neighbour, and the university needs to address that.

**Mrs Hanna:** I know that the Minister shares our concerns about alcohol-related problems, especially

underage drinking. Will the Minister comment on the number of under 18-year-olds who have been admitted to hospital with alcohol-related illnesses?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** On average, there are approximately 7,000 alcohol-related admissions per annum, of which some 200 are under 18; however, those are conservative estimates. It is worrying that 286 people died as a direct result of alcohol in 2007; in the same year, there were 387 admissions with liver cirrhosis — an increase of 25% on the previous year. We have a serious and growing problem. Alcohol is 62% more affordable today than it was in 1980, so we have to look at demand, supply and treatment.

### Capital Budget Programme

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his capital budget programme. (AQO 2407/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The outcome of the comprehensive spending review 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 across primary and community care, hospitals and emergency services. Despite those constraints, I am pressing ahead to ensure that almost £700 million of capital funding is being invested during the comprehensive spending review period to deliver first-class facilities across the service. That investment will bring about the completion of a new state-of-the-art £64 million enhanced local hospital in Downpatrick; the £100 million first phase of the Ulster Hospital; the new £14 million regional adolescent psychiatric unit and family centre at Forster Green Hospital; health and care centres at Castlereagh, Shankill Road, Beech Hall and Portadown; and the progression of the £143 million development of the new critical-care building at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that a re-profiling of capital expenditure by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister would be helpful in providing better health facilities in Northern Ireland and enable further investment in new projects, such as health and care facilities that are needed in my constituency in Larne and Carrickfergus and the progression of the project in Whiteabbey? Other capital projects could be re-profiled to the benefit of public health throughout Northern Ireland.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In our review of capital needs, we identified that the Health Service requires £7.8 billion. Our allocation over the next 10 years is £3.3 billion, some of which has to be discounted due to the current difficulties in

making asset disposals. We are well short of the capital amounts that we need; in fact, the Health Service has less than half of what it requires. Members will have heard me say that the Health Service requires three key overarching strategies: investment, efficiency, and engagement on public health with the local population. Investment is so important because one cannot be efficient in old buildings or with equipment of poor quality. We need investment.

We require flexibility in how money is allocated in the capital programme. We are always searching for value for money, and there is a debate on whether we should have traditional procurement or PFI. To move from one to the other requires flexibility because all the money for a PFI deal comes in one year; whereas the money in traditional procurement exercises is spread over as many as three years, as is the case with the Omagh hospital. That is our dilemma. Not only do we have less than half the money that we need, but the profile of the money and the length of time over which it comes makes life even more difficult.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his response to the previous question. With regard to capital investment in the south-west for a new hospital — which is a PFI project — will the Minister confirm that, today, the four banks in the Northern Ireland health group have signed the contract for a new acute hospital in Enniskillen, or is the Department again facing difficulties in getting a final commitment from those banks, given the firestorm that has blown through the halls of financial institutions in recent months?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I will write to the Member with precise details about that situation. However, I can tell him that that hospital will be delivered on time and on the money, as I have previously assured. I am not aware of any current difficulties with the banks. One of them, the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, abandoned PFI funding in late 2008 and, I understand, paid off several thousand members of its workforce in London. That decision caught out the PFI hospital project in Enniskillen as it caught out many other PFI projects throughout the UK and Europe. We have found other banks to step in, and there is competition to get that business.

I am not concerned about obtaining support for that project, but I am concerned for the future — for next year, the following year and the year after that — in getting best value for money, whether that be determined by PFI or by traditional procurement. We need that flexibility because if traditional procurement is an option in the future, that is the direction in which we should be able to go rather than being forced to go in another direction because of the cash profile.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat. Tá ceist agam don Aire.

When will the Minister be in a position to confirm the allocation of necessary capital funding for the building of new primary care centres in West Tyrone? Everyone knows that Omagh is now devoid of acute services, and it looks as if it will be that way for the future. Will the Minister prioritise the needs of Carrickmore and Fintona health centres? Primary care provision will be part of the healthcare solution in West Tyrone, so will the Minister confirm — as he has done for Castlereagh, the Shankill Road and Portadown — that those health and care centres will be completed sooner rather than later. When will the necessary money be allocated for Carrickmore and Fintona?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Mr McElduff is quite wrong when he talks about Omagh being devoid of acute services — that is completely untrue. Omagh's acute services will be delivered from Altnagelvin Area Hospital and the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. The Erne Hospital will soon benefit from a £250 million investment, subject to the issues that I outlined in my response to the previous question, and there is ongoing major investment in Altnagelvin. Therefore, it is wrong to say that Omagh is devoid of acute services; that is scaremongering.

I have conducted a capital review of primary care investment. That continues to be a work in progress; it is not complete and is, in fact, a moving picture because of the way in which our capital is profiled and because need continually changes. Maternity services are an example of that, for which I had to announce extra investment; new priorities arise. Fintona and Carrickmore health centres are part of the future development programme, but I am not clear when work is scheduled to commence. I cannot see the information on my list, but that does not mean to say that it is not there; it merely means that I cannot find it while I am standing here. I will write to the Member with exact dates.

### Assaults on Health Workers

3. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in reducing the number of assaults on healthcare staff and emergency workers. (AQO 2408/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In June 2007, I launched a campaign to spell out clearly the message of zero tolerance. Since then, I have taken steps to reinforce the message that attacks on staff are unacceptable. Those steps include investing in additional training for front line staff; accountability for zero tolerance being placed at senior level in every trust; the passage of new legislation — specifically, the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act

2008 — the relevant provisions of which are due to be commenced later in 2009 and will allow certain staff to remove people who create nuisance or disturbance from hospital premises, thereby ensuring a safer environment for staff and patients.

I have also initiated a high-level working group to examine the effectiveness of current legislation that protects healthcare workers from assault and to evaluate the support that is offered to staff. That working group has completed its report, and I am considering its recommendations.

2.45 pm

**Mr P J Bradley:** Will the new legislation make any attempt to recover from the perpetrators the costs of damage that is done to equipment and to people in hospitals?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The legislation relates more to damage to hospital premises. Of course, if one damages premises, whether they are hospital or other premises, one is subject to compensation claims if that damage can be proved. Trusts will be active in that direction.

As regards zero tolerance, I am primarily concerned with assaults against staff, whether they are physical or verbal. Physical assaults are running at just over 4,000 per annum and verbal assaults at 2,000 per annum. Although the increase has been arrested and we are looking at a fairly flat incidence rate, the number of continual physical and verbal — or both — attacks is still far too high for Health Service workers to have to deal with. I am looking at a further legislative step for the working group to consider that would follow the model that is being looked at in Scotland, where it will be a criminal offence to impede Health Service staff going about their business. I believe that that will be an important step. I have had discussions with the Northern Ireland Office and with Paul Goggins, given that the matter remains reserved. Nevertheless, it seems that that is the next step that we should take.

We will also enlist the general public's support through ongoing publicity campaigns. I have launched a leaflet that highlights the importance of the matter. That leaflet will go into every home in Northern Ireland over the next few weeks.

**Mr Craig:** Has the Minister looked into the possibility of getting a limited supply of anti-stab vests for those ambulance personnel who are perhaps working on night shifts and who have to deal with pubs and clubs emptying, which is when there is an increased level of attack on ambulance personnel? Unfortunately, from personal family circumstances, I speak with some experience on the issue.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have not looked specifically at such

equipment, but I am happy to do so. If the Ambulance Service comes forward with requests for that type of requirement, it will find me very receptive. Legislation has been passed that protects fire and police personnel specifically. However, and bearing in mind my answer to the previous question, I want to see legislation in place that will protect all Health Service staff, including ambulance personnel. It is an affront to consider that ambulance staff — and fire and police personnel — who are going out to support those members of the public who are in trouble are subject to assault.

**Mrs Long:** One aspect of monitoring the effectiveness of zero tolerance is monitoring prosecutions. Some trusts do that effectively and others do not. Has the Minister had any discussion with the Public Prosecution Service or the PSNI with regard to monitoring the prosecution of those who are charged with the offence of attacking Health Service workers?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** When I launched the next stage of the leaflet campaign last week in the Ulster Hospital, I spoke with Assistant Chief Constable Duncan McCausland. The Member will be aware that we have police support in the accident and emergency department of the City Hospital at the weekend. As the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 stands, it is up to individuals to take forward prosecutions, albeit that they are supported by the trusts. I am trying to move us beyond that, so that the initiative rests not necessarily with the individual employee, but with the employer. I think that that is a much better way to go forward.

The police are not slow to give us support. However, 80% of the people who are admitted to the accident and emergency department of the Belfast City Hospital each weekend are under the influence of alcohol.

### Hospital Staff Facilities

4. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when staff facilities, including changing facilities, for nurses will be mandatory in all hospitals. (AQO 2409/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In February 2008, I announced a regional dress-code policy that included the provision of changing facilities as part of a package of measures to improve patient safety and reduce the speed of healthcare-associated infection. All trusts were required to implement the dress-code policy with immediate effect. That policy includes the requirement to provide staff-changing facilities. It is being fully implemented in all new buildings such as the new Downe Hospital and the south-west hospital.

Existing facilities will have a phased implementation plan, with each trust determining a staff-changing

policy in the interim that reflects local circumstances and available accommodation. My officials will review the status of the implementation across the five trusts in April.

**Lord Browne:** I thank the Minister for his answer. It is important to recognise the invaluable work that all our nurses carry out with such dedication and commitment. It is only proper that they should be provided with modern, suitable staffing facilities.

However, my constituents have informed me that the staff of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's regional adolescent mental-health service inpatient unit at Knockbracken have to eat with the patients. There is also no staff kitchen, no showering facilities for staff, and no dedicated staff room. I would be grateful if the Minister undertook to address that matter and to ensure that suitable staff facilities are provided.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Lord Browne has highlighted one of the areas of poor investment over the past number of years. In fact, as part of our current work, I announced that we will build a new regional adolescent unit and a family unit at Knockbracken. That will specifically address the issue, because the unit will come complete with all the facilities required to support staff.

There are changing facilities in the acute-hospitals sector, but it is correct to say that changing facilities are more sporadic in the other parts of the Health Service. In comparatively recent times, investment was found to take staff-changing facilities out of those units. Now we have to find investment to put them back. That is easy to do when new units are being built — the facilities are simply included as part of the plan — but it is often difficult as part of refurbishment because it is about finding the space. However, that is something that we have to do, and I am very keen to ensure that staff have the proper facilities to allow them to do their jobs.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Changing rooms cannot be built on the site of the Royal Maternity Hospital, so will the Minister speed up the process of building the new regional women and children's hospital to ensure that all the health and safety facilities that he just outlined will be included in that new hospital? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The majority of the Royal Victoria Hospital's areas have staff-changing facilities. We are investing in its maternity unit because it badly needs upgrading and health and safety work to be carried out. That will have the effect of increasing the unit's capacity.

Instead of getting the £7.8 billion that I need to renew many of the facilities over 10 years, I will receive less than half that amount. That means that the women

and children's hospital cannot be completed as quickly as I would like it to be completed. In fact, the children's hospital is due to come into service around 2016, which is as quickly as it can be completed unless Members care to re-prioritise the capital spend and allocate more money to the Department of Health.

**Mr Burns:** Will the Minister give the Assembly a general update on the management of hospital-acquired infections? Are the numbers going down?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The measures that we introduced to change the culture in hospitals — including hand hygiene, uniforms, visiting, and so on — have all had some effect.

It is hard to quantify the effect each measure has had. However, there has certainly been an appreciable improvement as far as healthcare-acquired infections are concerned. For example, last year's outbreak in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has been over for many months.

I will announce, tomorrow or on Wednesday, the composition of the panel that will carry out the review into the outbreak of *clostridium difficile* in the Northern Trust, and that will be another piece of work that will be very valuable in informing our progress.

**Mr Gardiner:** I welcome the Minister's comments on an issue that affects many hospitals throughout Northern Ireland. What is the current position on staff-changing facilities in the trusts? What is being done to ensure that more staff use those facilities in the effort to boost the control of infection?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As I said, changing facilities in existing buildings are not adequate, and we are working to find the investment to address the issue. It will certainly be addressed in all newbuild. All acute hospitals have staff-changing facilities, although some areas in the Royal Victoria Hospital, the City Hospital and the Mater Hospital remain deficient in that regard. The current body of knowledge does not indicate clearly that uniforms are a significant source of cross-infection. However, I strongly believe that we must put those facilities in place because they will make a difference, albeit a small one.

## Substance-Misuse Services

5. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether staff working in substance-misuse services are trained to meet the mental-health needs of their patients. (AQO 2410/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Almost all staff in statutory addiction-treatment services have been trained in mental-health

issues, with the majority having a professional mental-health qualification. They are, therefore, competent in the assessment and treatment of the majority of mild to moderate mental-health problems associated with substance misuse. In addition, mental-health and risk assessments are carried out on all patients, and they are subsequently referred to the appropriate mental-health services as necessary.

**Mr D Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. What role does child psychiatry play in the treatment of substance abuse in younger people?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As part of our new strategic direction on drugs and alcohol, we have introduced a policy initiative called Hidden Harm, which focuses specifically on identifying and supporting children who live in a home in which one or both parents are addicted to either drugs or alcohol. That is one way in which we can move forward. Of course, that initiative brings into effect social services and all the resources that they have available to offer support. The Member is quite right to suggest that there is a strong correlation between poor mental health and drug and alcohol misuse.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Minister for his earlier response. He will be aware of the wide range of mental-health facilities that are based in my constituency, particularly in Armagh city. Given last Thursday's decision by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, will the Minister undertake to meet me and a small delegation from Armagh to discuss concerns around the proposals, including access to mental-health services in the area and the future development of the St Luke's, Longstone and Mullinure hospital sites?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Yes, of course, I am happy to meet Mr Kennedy and a delegation about the matter. However, I must point out that the proposals by the Southern Trust are part of a set of proposals that have been subject to a long consultation period. That consultation has produced decisions, and I know that Members are happy about some of them, such as those on Skeagh House. The proposals must now come to me so that I can make a final decision on them. Therefore, nothing will, in fact, be decided until I get an opportunity to examine the proposals and determine the way forward.

As far as mental health and learning disability are concerned, I am governed by the Bamford Review and the cross-departmental action plan that we are putting in place. That will dictate the way forward for the next 10 to 15 years and how facilities work into that action plan to support the service.

3.00 pm

## AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Farm Modernisation Scheme

1. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to fund all of the applications received under the farm modernisation scheme. (AQO 2426/09)

9. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the allocation of the farm modernisation scheme met with all the relevant EU legislation about the allocation of EU funds. (AQO 2434/09)

10. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the correspondence her Department received from the European Commission about the application process for the farm modernisation scheme. (AQO 2435/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 9 and 10 together.

Almost 10,000 applications for the programme have been received. Given that the budget for this tranche of funding is £6 million, it is not financially possible for the Department to fund all the applications. The total cost of funding all the applications would be in the region of £40 million, and it is anticipated that approximately 1,100 will receive grant aid.

The farm modernisation scheme is an integral part of the rural development programme, which was approved by the European Commission in July 2007. EU rules required us to establish selection criteria for the scheme, and those were finalised in October 2008. My officials considered that the scheme met all relevant EU legislation, and I remain of that opinion.

The Department received a letter from the European Commission — dated 12 February 2009 — on the afternoon of 17 February. That letter drew our attention to the need to have defined criteria for the selection of operations and projects and asked which selection criteria would be applied to the farm modernisation scheme. We responded to the Commission's letter on 19 March and explained the full set of criteria that were used in the scheme. My officials continue to work with Commission officials with a view to the first tranche of funding proceeding as planned.

The Department received a second letter from the European Commission on 12 March, which suspended the proposal to include additional national funding in the scheme. That suspension is linked to the Commission's comments on the selection process and will be revisited when the wider issue is resolved.

**Mr McQuillan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that it would be beneficial to the economy if all the farmers who applied to the scheme were approved and given match funding?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I fully concur with the Member, but we do not have £40 million in the Budget to approve all the applications. I made the point to my Executive colleagues that the scheme would be an excellent boost to the rural economy. Before Christmas, when we looked at ways to boost the economy, I had hoped that additional money would be allocated to the scheme. We were not successful in securing that additional funding, but we were successful in all our other bids.

We recognise the benefit that the farm modernisation scheme brings to the rural economy, and if possible, I still want to put more money into the programme. I hope that a lot of people will benefit from what is a good scheme and, ultimately, invest a lot of their money in the rural economy.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Is the Minister seriously telling the House that there is no difference in opinion between her Department and the Commission in relation to the administration of the scheme? At the time that the scheme was enacted, the European Commission clearly expressed its displeasure about the first-come-first-served basis on which it was administered and distanced itself from that approach.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** There is no difference; there was a misunderstanding, which led to an unfortunate sequence of events on 17 February. However, we are resolving the issue, and I am confident that it can be fully resolved in the not-too-distant future. The Commission had approved our approach, and Commission officials were present when it was discussed at the monitoring committee.

The Member can shake his head all he wants, but he is not going to win the European election on the basis of giving me a hard time. We fully discussed the matter with the Commission, and it was quite happy with what we had done. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I knew that mention of the European election would creep in at some stage.

**Mr O'Loan:** Does the Minister not accept that the long lines of farmers who queued through the night for modest grants say something about the state of farming? Given the predictability of that situation, was her

decision to proceed with that form of administering grants not a fundamental and tactical error on her part?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I do not believe that it was an error, either fundamental or tactical.

Until informal discussions began on 5 February, we were unaware of any potential problems with the selection criteria for the scheme. When we were made aware of some potential issues, we began to explain our position fully to the Commission. However, there was an issue in how the scheme was understood, and I think that it was felt that there were no selection criteria, but, clearly, there were. I said in the Chamber when I answered questions on the matter previously that I did not want farmers to queue overnight. The scheme was supposed to open in October, but we suspended it for a number of months in an attempt to try to find a scheme that would not involve farmers queuing.

Farmers had asked us for a scheme that was simple and unbureaucratic. Farming unions had worked closely with us on it, and they have supported me on the issue. It is difficult to design such a scheme, and if anyone in the Chamber has the wisdom to tell me a better way of doing so, I am more than happy to hear about it.

**Mr Kennedy:** It is small wonder I have a bad back, given that I am having to jump up and down like a jack-in-the-box.

I welcome the Minister's response. Given the huge uncertainty over the application process for the farm modernisation programme, does the Minister intend to review it? Clear confusion and ambiguities existed in the process, and farmers felt stress as a consequence. Will she carry out a review and publish the resulting report?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I said on the morning of 17 February, before comments were made at lunchtime, that we will review tranches 2 and 3 of the scheme. That has been my position throughout. I do not accept that there was either ambiguity or confusion. The scheme was very simple and straightforward. It was as heavily oversubscribed as it was because farmers understood exactly what it was and how simple and straightforward it was. As a result, they liked it and applied for it. We should look at the positive in that.

My answer to Mr McQuillan is that this is good thing, and if we get more money, we want to put it into farm modernisation so that more farmers can benefit from these grants and take the opportunity to modernise their farms. That is what it is all about.

**Mr McCarthy:** Like Danny Kennedy's back, mine is sore from jumping up and down, but I am here anyway.

Will the Minister explain the reason that a lucky dip, which was good enough for some applications that

were sent by post, could not have been used for all applications? That resulted in that the ridiculous long queues in our streets that we witnessed on television.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I thought that you were going to say that your back is sore from queuing, Kieran, but, obviously, that is not the case.

We had a number of criteria to satisfy. We had to meet equality considerations, and we needed to preserve an audit trail. That was why we were advised that a lucky dip would not work in this case. It was an option that we discussed and thought about, but we were advised not to go down that route.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr Kennedy and Mr McCarthy, I hope that both your backs recover in time for the European elections.

## Little Acre Open Farm

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on action taken in relation to Little Acre Open Farm. (AQO 2427/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Since I updated the Assembly in November 2008, Little Acre Open Farm has been monitored every two weeks by Veterinary Service officials, and I am happy to advise that there has been a marked improvement in welfare conditions there.

Under regulation 11 of the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2000, my officials can serve an improvement notice to a keeper setting out what steps are necessary to improve the welfare of their animals. That is an effective tool for ensuring that animals' needs are met, and failure to comply with a notice can lead to prosecution. I confirm that the herd keeper has complied fully with the regulation 11 notice served on 9 January 2009, demonstrating the improvements that have been made on his farm.

Follow-up inspections will continue to take place as appropriate to ongoing findings and the outcome of the forthcoming PSNI prosecution case, which is still before the court.

An independent investigation report surrounding animal welfare issues at a farm in Katesbridge is in the final stages of completion. When that report is issued, I will consider a review of procedures which will take into account the events at Little Acre Open Farm.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for that answer. Has she identified any immediate failures by her Department in the process leading up to the Little Acre Open Farm issue, especially given the fact that in the two years prior to that incident, officials from her Department visited the farm on nine occasions, the last of which was a very short period before the incident was discovered?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I must point out again that the primary responsibility for the welfare of an animal on a farm rests with the farmer. My Department's inspection procedures are checks, within the resources available, on the standards being achieved by farmers. Those inspections are led by professional and experienced veterinary surgeons working in the Veterinary Service. I believe that vets are the best judges of animal welfare. The inspection procedures have been audited by the Food and Veterinary Office of the European Commission. The most recent welfare audit of Britain, which included the North of Ireland, concluded that, overall, inspections were competently performed. As I have said previously, a review of procedures will be commissioned following the final report of the Katesbridge inquiry. However, I am not in a position to pre-empt that report. I cannot give the Member any more information until I get it myself.

**Mr Gallagher:** Does the Minister accept that problems in relation to animal cruelty will continue until better legislation is in place? Given that bodies such as the USPCA continue to be very frustrated about the delay in her Department bringing forward such legislation, can the Minister give us a timetable for it today?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** That question is concerned with action that was taken in relation to the incident at Little Acre Open Farm. There is a later question, which I hope to get to, and I do not want to pre-empt the answer to another Member's question. I hope that Mr Gallagher can give me a certain amount of latitude on that.

## **Woodland Protection**

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will increase protection for ancient woodland. (AQO 2428/09)

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Ancient woodland is already protected in a number of ways. The Planning Service takes account of woodland that is included in the ancient woodland inventory. That is a material consideration when responding to planning applications. A similar level of protection applies to woodland that is listed in the register of historic parks, gardens and demesnes, and its supplementary list. Permission for area plans will not be granted if an area of ancient woodland within that has been approved as a site of local nature conservation importance.

I plan to further increase the protection for ancient woodland through measures to be included in a new forestry Bill. That Bill will make provision for the protection of all woodland from unregulated felling, through the introduction of felling licences. The Bill

will include provisions to protect woodland from damage caused by wildlife, which can occur in woodland and on adjacent land.

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Minister for that response and I welcome her assurances. I trust that that forestry Bill will soon be forthcoming. In the last round of the countryside management scheme (CMS), specific priority was given to areas designated as ASSIs. In future rounds of the CMS, will the Minister extend that to include all ancient woodland?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I will certainly look at that and will come back to the Member in writing, if that is OK.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her response. She mentioned that she will be giving extra protection to ancient woodland through a new forestry Bill. Is it the Minister's intention to give people incentives, within that new Bill, to plant more broadleaf trees, which are so precious to the countryside? Presently, there are a number of area plans unfolding. What protection will be given to woodland within those area plans?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I do not have all the details of the countryside management scheme. However, we will be encouraging people to plant more broadleaf species in order to improve the cover.

The Programme for Government contains targets for increasing the level of forestry cover. Much of that will be taken up by alternative energy crops such as willow, but we want to encourage people to plant more broadleaf species to produce trees that will be around for future generations to enjoy.

3.15 pm

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh míle maith agat. When does the Minister think that the new forestry Bill will come into effect?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I hope that the draft Bill will be referred to the Executive in April 2009 and that agreement will be sought to introduce the Bill to the Assembly in May. That will happen in the not-too-distant future.

## **Animal Welfare Legislation**

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has completed her review of animal welfare legislation. (AQO 2429/09)

17. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to bring forward proposals for an animal welfare Bill. (AQO 2442/09)

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** In my statement to the Assembly on 26 January 2009, I outlined the actions that I had taken to

date to review animal welfare legislation in the North. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006, but, as that was carried out under direct rule, I wanted to take time to fully consider existing animal welfare legislation and the responses that were received to that consultation. I completed an initial review, and I met a range of key stakeholders from here, Britain and the South. Those meetings have been exceptionally informative. My review of animal welfare legislation is nearing completion, and I shall shortly examine all the evidence that is presented to me.

I have made it clear that a new animal welfare Bill is one of my key ministerial priorities. I already submitted a marker bid for an animal welfare Bill, and I expect to be in a position to seek Executive approval to bring forward the Bill shortly after the summer recess.

As I said previously in the Chamber, it is important that animal welfare legislation is broadly compatible across the island, and that view is shared by many of the welfare groups that I met. I welcome the fact that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South is continuing to progress its own legislative proposals on animal welfare, and I repeat that I will bring forward a Bill shortly after the summer recess. After the recent debate in the House, that will be welcome news.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Was that your answer to questions 4 and 17?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Yes.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Minister has a great way with her. *[Laughter.]* She does.

Will she listen to the public, to animal welfare groups and to the Assembly and lead the process? I understand that she wants to look at an all-Ireland agenda, but surely it would be OK for the Assembly to come in first, and the other agenda could follow us two or three years later.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The Member has a great way with him, too, but he did not listen to my answer. I said that I am looking at issues across the island, but we are bringing forward our own legislation.

In my statement to the Assembly in January, I said that one of my priorities was the regulation of puppy farms. I intend to deal with that by introducing legislation to mirror that of the legislation in Britain in order to end the intensive farming of puppies here.

My officials also raised the issue with colleagues and welfare groups in the South, because it is the Department's view that puppy farming is an all-island problem that must be tackled on an all-Ireland basis,

along with the issue of dangerous dogs and dogfighting. We do not want to push those problems a few miles down the road across the border; they need to be tackled holistically. We will bring forward legislation after the summer recess.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for her reply. It certainly has taken a long time to get to where we are. Has the Minister had any consultations with the authorities in the United Kingdom? Obviously, the issue is not totally new.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Yes, we talked to many groups from the North, the South and Britain. Britain's legislation was updated more recently than ours, and we wanted to see how that had worked out. We wanted to see whether we could improve on that and to learn from their experiences. As was the case with our consultation with all the groups, our consultation with groups in Britain has been very beneficial and informative. I have said repeatedly that I did not want a knee-jerk reaction to the proposed legislation, but that I wanted to take time to consider it, get it right and ensure that we had legislation that is fit for purpose and that will last for a considerable period.

**Mr Molloy:** I thank the Minister for her reply. Does she believe that penalties for people who are found guilty of animal abuse should be more severe?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** A person who is convicted of cruelty to animals under the Welfare of Animals Act 1972 is liable on conviction to a maximum fine of £5,000 and/or imprisonment of up to three months. In addition, a court may also disqualify someone from keeping animals if he or she is found guilty of cruelty. I welcome the fact that current legislation includes both fines and custodial sentences. However, in bringing forward new legislation, I want to increase the maximum penalties for animal cruelty that are available to courts so that those penalties can act as a sufficient deterrent and can, therefore, provide adequate protection for animals.

**Mr O'Loan:** What specific cognisance will the Minister take of legislation that applies in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland when she is drawing up her proposals?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I want to take cognisance of that legislation. As I have already said, I want to ensure that the North's legislation includes the best of that which exists in other areas. We want to ensure that our legislation is fit for purpose.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 5 has been withdrawn.

## Climate Change

6. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to adaptation to climate change and the potential impact that climate change will have on the farming community.

(AQO 2431/09)

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I have had no discussions with the Minister of the Environment on the matter. However, I have written to him and have expressed my concern about the potential impact that climate change will have on the farming community. I believe that it is vital that the impact of climate change on the farming community, and any impact of our efforts to combat it, is at the top of the agenda for those who have responsibility to lead the way on the issue.

Climate change adaptation — change in economic or social behaviour in response to the impacts of climate change — is increasingly seen as a crucial element of the response to man-made climate change. Most climate scientists accept that some degree of warming is inevitable and that, therefore, changes to how we live and work will be necessary. Local farming communities will need to be supported as they make those necessary changes.

**Mr McCallister:** The Minister has accepted that climate change will have a major impact on farming communities. Will she also accept that farming communities can play a role to help to redress some of that? Will she, therefore, offer more practical and financial support to farming communities in order to assist them with on-farm renewable energy sources?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** That question has been put to me recently. My Department will want to examine that matter during further tranches of the farm modernisation programme, for example.

Under the countryside management scheme, my Department funds schemes that will help to alleviate some of the challenges that exist as a result of climate change. For the local agriculture industry, climate change offers opportunities as well as challenges. New crops may become feasible, although I am not sure that Mr McCallister will be growing grapes rather than dairy farming. The growing season for other crops may lengthen.

However, the challenges that are posed by climate change could be severe and could include: increased risks to crops and livestock of unpredictable and severe weather conditions, such as those that caused floods in 2008; increased risk of disease outbreaks in livestock in warmer and, possibly, wetter weather; and risk to coastal farms as sea levels rise. The Department,

therefore, recognises that significant challenges face the farming community.

**Mr T Clarke:** Surely the Minister and the author are not suggesting bringing more bureaucracy into farming? I thought that Mr McCallister would go as far as to suggest putting nappies on cows.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** You can respond to that if you wish to, Minister.

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Apparently, the other end of a cow does more damage, so nappies would not even work.

I am mindful of the need to reduce bureaucracy in the Department. Whatever plans we bring forward, we will try to reduce the bureaucratic risk to farmers.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her detailed advice and, indeed, answers. I am aware that she has bought into the idea of global warming and the implications of climate change for crops and animals. However, having listened to her earlier response, I am unsure as to whether she has, in fact, received any advice from the Department of the Environment on that matter. The Minister explained the need for action in order to deal with the worst excesses of climate change.

Has the Minister or the Department of the Environment — the host Department for such matters — initiated any wider cross-departmental action — including with the Executive — on the implications of climate change? Go raibh maith agat.

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The overwhelming scientific consensus is that the changes in the world's climate are the result of human activities and must be addressed through emissions reductions and adaptations to alter climatic conditions. I want to ensure that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's response to climate change is economically and environmentally sustainable. In fact, I believe that we can take steps to reduce agricultural greenhouse-gas emissions for the benefit of farmers through, for example, efficiencies in energy and nutrient use rather than by imposing additional economic burdens.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister will be aware, the all-party working group on climate change discussed the issue with the Met Office last week. What contact has the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had with the Met Office on the impact of climate change on the farming community?

### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The Rivers Agency is the drainage and flood-defence authority for the North, and in support of its functions it contacts the Met Office regularly about weather forecasting, weather radar and heavy-

rain warnings and, more recently, about the new flood warning centre in England. Furthermore, the agency is represented on the committee for climate impacts programme and seeks guidance on climate change from the UK climate impacts programme. Those contacts are essential to the delivery of the agency's flood-risk management programme for the wider community.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr Lunn is not in his place. I call Mr Pat Ramsey.

### Badger Baiting

8. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her Department is doing to support attempts to address badger baiting in rural areas. (AQO 2433/09)

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, it is an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal, and it is a specific offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal by causing, procuring, assisting or spectating at the baiting of badgers or any animal. Any person found guilty of those offences is liable, on summary conviction, to up to three months' imprisonment, a fine of £5,000 or both. I understand that the Minister of the Environment intends to include in the Wildlife Order 1985 a custodial sentence for those engaged in that so-called sport. Until then, the penalties — which include imprisonment — in the Welfare of Animals Act can be applied.

The penalties that are available to the courts will form a significant part of my deliberations on new animal-welfare legislation. I intend to ensure that the penalties, whether fines or custodial sentences, are a sufficient deterrent. That will include offences that relate to badger baiting. Although the PSNI is responsible for enforcing animal-welfare legislation that relates to non-farmed animals such as badgers, my officials form part of a multi-agency body known as the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW), whose partners include representatives of organisations that are involved in the enforcement of wildlife law. PAW liaises closely with the PSNI wildlife officer and other key enforcement agencies. It aims to facilitate an exchange of information and to ensure public awareness of the key issues, including animal-welfare issues arising from badger persecution and the illegal hunting of wild deer.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Minister for her detailed response. Given the growing concern and alarm at the increase in badger baiting, will the Department introduce legislation that will definitively make badger baiting illegal in Northern Ireland?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** It is already illegal. The PSNI is

responsible for enforcing animal-welfare legislation that relates to non-farmed animals such as badgers. My officials continue to liaise closely with the PSNI on the enforcement of animal-welfare legislation. If the legislation is not strong enough, the Department will keep an eye on it and review it as necessary.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Two more Members want to speak. Mr Brady, if your question is brief, I can call both of them.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister is aware of my interest in badgers. What powers exist to protect them?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am well aware of the Member's interest. In addition to the powers in the Welfare of Animals Act, badgers receive full protection under the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, which falls within the remit of the Department of the Environment. I understand that the Order makes it an offence to damage or disturb a badger's sett or to disturb a badger in its sett. I hope that Mr Brady will look after the badgers in his backyard.

3.30 pm

**Mr Armstrong:** What discussion has the Minister had with the Minister of the Environment regarding a selective cull to help to redress the high incidence of bovine TB in badgers in Northern Ireland? Will the Minister share that information with the House?

#### **The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** That supplementary question does not relate directly to the main question. However, as the Member will know, my Department is working through a three-strand approach to dealing with the problem of bovine TB that also addresses the wildlife factor. We are working with the Environment Minister and his officials to move that forward, but farmers have responsibilities also, as the Member will know. We want to be absolutely sure that wildlife is a contributory factor to TB, as that information can help us to eradicate the disease.

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Urban Renewal Area Status

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Social Development why there has been a delay in bringing forward the urban renewal area status for the upper long streets in North Belfast. (AQO 2446/09)

#### **The Minister for Social Development (Ms**

**Ritchie):** Regeneration proposals for the upper long streets were under consideration long before I became Minister for Social Development. In that respect I can

fully understand the frustration of the community, which has continued to wait patiently for that consideration to be concluded. I have visited the upper long streets on two separate occasions at the request of my colleague Mr Alban Maginness, and I have seen at first hand the decline into which some of the houses there have fallen.

However, the dilemma is in identifying exactly what sort of regeneration is needed and is deliverable. For example, I have already seen plans that would have involved the demolition of 178 homes, many of which are still occupied. Indeed, 78% of residents think that their accommodation is suitable for their needs. Had I agreed to demolish those 178 homes, the maximum number of units built to replace them would have been only 98. Even allowing for existing voids and those seeking a move, it was estimated that that would have resulted in almost 50 families being required to move away from the area, as we would not have been able to accommodate them after regeneration had been completed.

The Member will be well aware of the acute housing need in that area, and in North Belfast generally. Is it right to carry out a major redevelopment that, although resulting in better housing, results in substantially less housing?

The Housing Executive is now working on new proposals for a major refurbishment project that would update and refresh those homes in greatest need, with demolition only of those homes that are beyond repair. I expect that work to be carried out shortly, and I assure the Member, other Members in North Belfast, and the wider community of the upper long streets that I will take a personal interest in the issue to make sure that the best possible solution is found.

**Ms Ni Chuilín:** I thank the Minister for her response. She is right; the situation has been going on since 2002. Given what the Minister has said, is she prepared, because of her personal interest, to go and speak to all the residents of the upper long streets, who have been told that their refurbished homes will be refurbished again, rather than given the full redevelopment that was promised?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank the Member for her question. I have listened to various delegations and heard at first hand their concerns in relation to the upper long streets. I want to await the report from the Housing Executive, which I hope to receive shortly. If I do not receive it shortly, I will pursue the matter through my officials and through the Housing Executive. I want to see the best possible solution for all of the residents of the long streets.

**Mrs Hanna:** I thank the Minister for that very detailed response. What are the principal features of the current proposals?

**The Minister for Social Development:** My overall objectives are to reduce the physical decline in the area by preventing blight caused by vacant and blocked-up houses, to significantly improve the housing stock and to create a secure, attractive residential and physical environment.

All that can be achieved in a number of ways, from re-improvement of existing stock, with selected demolition and infill, where appropriate, to wholesale demolition and regeneration.

In the long streets, the wholesale demolition option would have involved, as I said earlier, demolishing 178 of 211 homes, and put-back would have been 98 new homes, meaning that about 50 families would have had no choice but to move away from the area. That is not how I want to proceed, because I do not want anyone to be without a home in an area of high housing need. I believe that the area can be regenerated with more emphasis on refurbishment, and that is why I have asked the Housing Executive to examine the options further. However, I want to await its report in order to see how we can proceed.

**Mr Cobain:** I am sure that many Members will be disappointed with that answer. Many of us who witnessed the refurbishment phases in the early 1970s and 1980s know that they proved to be an absolute disaster for the people who had to live in those conditions. Most commentators would say that we need between 2,000 and 2,500 new homes each year in order to meet housing need. It was deeply disappointing that in the Programme for Government that target was reduced to 1,500 new social and affordable homes. Does the Minister agree with me that any further reductions in the provision of new homes would be a betrayal of the thousands of working families and individuals who rely on the state for their housing needs, particularly in North Belfast, where we have some of the worst areas of social and economic deprivation in western Europe?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Cobain for his question. The Housing Executive's needs analysis has shown quite clearly that there is a requirement for 3,000 social houses each year. Therefore, there is a need for a financial stimulus for the social housing development programme. I have been trying to persuade my Executive colleagues to ensure that more funding is put into the social housing development programme, and that that programme is put on a surer financial footing. I have also commissioned a piece of work in that regard.

I cannot disagree with the Member: there is a need for social housing throughout Northern Ireland, and I am particularly aware of the acute housing need in North Belfast. In fact, I am aware that the Member met one of my officials before Question Time to discuss an urban renewal project in the Rosebank/Ohio area. We

are still examining the best possible solution, bearing in mind the acute housing need in that part of North Belfast.

### Mortgage-Relief Scheme

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how she will introduce a mortgage-relief scheme and whether she has contacted any of her ministerial colleagues to gain their support for this action. (AQO 2447/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** During the Assembly debate on the mortgage-rescue scheme on 10 March 2009, I announced my intention to provide an additional £100,000 to launch the advice element of the scheme during April. Unfortunately, however, I do not have the funding to allow me to launch the financial-rescue element of the scheme.

My Department consulted every Member about the proposed scheme at the end of last year. In addition, the Committee for Social Development has been briefed on the proposals. Therefore, all the consultation has been done, as has all the work. However, I will not raise the expectations of people who are struggling to stay on the housing ladder when I simply do not have the budget to provide the kind of financial assistance that is required.

I will, however, continue to bid for additional funding. I have already made bids for a mortgage-rescue plan in three successive monitoring rounds in June, September and December 2008. However, as Members will know, none of those bids has been met.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her response and I welcome her efforts. Some £50 million was taken from the social security capital grant at one stage. Would there have been an opportunity there to have used some of that money to address the issue of mortgage relief? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**The Minister for Social Development:** As the member is aware, I made a request to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the wider Executive for reallocations in my Department's budget to be approved, as I am required and obliged to do. I was given approval for some of that money; however, I was not given approval for the rest of it — and that is history. Had that money been approved, it would have been useful in dealing with pressures in the housing budget. One of those pressures was a mortgage-rescue scheme for which I had a bid for £5 million.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her response: as always she gives plenty of detail in her answers. The Minister will be aware that the Minister for Finance and Personnel indicated his concern about house repossession during last week's Question Time,

and I know that she is aware of the concerns that we in the Chamber have about the issue. The Minister mentioned the mortgage-rescue scheme, which would at least give partial relief — a 13-week breathing period — to those facing repossession. That is not a long-lasting exercise, but it does give some short-term relief. Has the Minister had the chance to discuss, or look at, the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments to see how that can be progressed? Has she had any discussions with people in other parts of the United Kingdom about house repossessions to see whether we can learn something from them?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Shannon for his questions, which I will answer in reverse order. On 11 February 2009, I met Margaret Beckett, the Minister for Housing and Planning in Britain, to discuss a range of issues, one of which was the mortgage-rescue scheme. In November 2008, I met the Council of Mortgage Lenders in London and heard, at first hand, how it was implementing such a scheme in Britain.

As regards Mr Shannon's first question, I have read the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments. I repeat what I said earlier, I bid for a mortgage-rescue scheme in three separate monitoring rounds in June, September and December of last year. I did not receive the funding; however, I will continue to bid for additional funding. The scheme is ready to roll: the only thing that I need is the money.

**Mr Armstrong:** In light of the growing crisis in the Minister's budgetary position, will she list her top priorities for the coming financial year?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Member will be aware that I outlined my Department's whole budget to the Committee for Social Development on 26 March 2009, and the House will be aware that the Social Development budget is divided into three discrete areas.

The first area deals with the Social Security Agency and the child maintenance and enforcement division, the second area deals specifically with urban regeneration and community development, and the third area deals with the one that I am most concerned about, namely housing.

I outlined quite clearly that there are certain pressures on the housing budget. Again, I go back to the principal issue, which was that I was left with two choices; either to carry out planned maintenance or to provide homes to those in greatest need. When I am faced with such a pressure, I am duty bound to provide for people in housing need throughout Northern Ireland, and the numbers on the waiting list are testament to that.

## Housing: Upper Bann

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Social Development how many new social housing properties the Housing Executive will build and how many derelict properties it will refurbish in the Upper Bann constituency, in the coming financial year.

(AQO 2448/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** There is a slight difficulty in the wording of the question. Notwithstanding that, I know that Mr Savage is a member of the board of Gosford Housing Association. Therefore, he will be well aware that the Housing Executive itself no longer actually builds social housing and that since 1996 that is now the role of the registered housing associations, which can attract private finance to support the delivery of more housing for, in effect, less public subsidy.

In respect of our plans for this year, the social housing development programme is currently being finalised and, when that is available, it will outline the new housing provision that will be delivered across Northern Ireland and, indeed, in Upper Bann over the next five years.

I will place a copy of the programme in the Assembly Library when it is available, because many Members, including Mr Savage, have asked me about it.

3.45 pm

With regard to derelict properties, the Member will be aware that I set up an empty-homes unit in the Housing Executive specifically to look at how more empty homes can be brought back into use. A lot of very good preparatory work has already taken place to identify how many homes are vacant and what scope there is to bring them back into use. The level of vacant properties across the public sector continues to fall year on year. Many properties in the private sector have been successfully refurbished and maintained through the award of a private-sector grant. Therefore, I give a cautionary warning that the number of empty homes available for re-use is much lower than earlier estimates suggested.

**Mr Savage:** I thank the Minister for her answer. The second part of my question was about the number of empty homes. When driving through Banbridge this morning, it was drawn to my attention that four houses in one street were boarded up. Especially in an area where there is a great demand for social housing, is there any way that the refurbishment process can be speeded up to alleviate the housing problem?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr Savage asked a particular question about Banbridge. I will ensure that officials investigate that issue directly with the Housing Executive, because there could be various

reasons for those houses being vacant — they may be used for decant purposes to relocate people during a refurbishment scheme, or there may be other reasons. However, we need to get to the bottom of it, and I assure the Member that I will do that.

With regard to the general issue of empty homes: there are many empty homes, or void properties, throughout Northern Ireland, but the earlier estimates would have suggested a greater number. Further investigations and exploratory work demonstrated that some of those houses were not really empty when they were matched against rating records. The other interesting factor is that if houses that are vacant could be brought back into use, I have no doubt that they could be used to alleviate the social housing waiting list. Of course, that is all predicated on where the housing need lies, and the housing need needs to lie in areas where the waiting lists are longest. Again, that is subject to review, because people will apply to only those areas where there is available property.

**Mr Bresland:** Does the Minister have any plans to refurbish properties in the Strabane District Council area, because every time that one gets dates about refurbishment, they are going backwards instead of forward?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank the Member for his question. I do not have to hand the information to answer his question, but, as soon as Question Time is over, I will ensure that my officials examine that matter directly with the Housing Executive, and I will reply to the Member by letter as quickly as possible.

**Mr D Bradley:** What is the Minister doing to ensure that funds available for the social housing development programme deliver the maximum number of homes?

**The Minister for Social Development:** That was one of the issues that taxed me last week and in the previous weeks in the run-up to the determination on the Budget. I was anxious to ensure that those in housing need were accommodated. As a result, through a determination on the Budget, I hope that we will be able to meet a target of 1,750 houses in the new financial year.

The Member will understand that because of the economic downturn, the downturn in the level of capital receipts and the reduction in the number of social houses sold by the Housing Executive, less money is available. Therefore, the assumptions upon which that Budget was based are no longer valid and, as a result, we are 400 houses shy of the target for this year. Notwithstanding that, I am still determined to deliver 10,000 social and affordable houses over the next five years. However, the most important thing is to ensure that the social housing development programme is put on a sound financial footing once and for all. I

have already presented a paper to my Executive colleagues on the matter, and I have commissioned a piece of work in that respect.

From all of the research that has been carried out, and from independent analysis that many people, including well-known Northern Ireland economists, have undertaken, it is clear that investment in the social housing development programme not only acts as a stimulus to the local economy and has a multiplier effect — because it is a labour-intensive industry — but provides a valuable asset and ensures that we are addressing the wider issue of housing need across Northern Ireland.

### Warm Homes Scheme

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the revised criteria for the new warm homes scheme. (AQO 2449/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** In recent weeks, I have been contacted by a number of Members seeking clarification of the warm homes scheme and, in particular, the award of the new management contract.

The warm homes scheme is the main programme to alleviate fuel poverty through improving the energy efficiency of private-sector homes. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report, and subsequent Public Accounts Committee report, recommended certain changes to the scheme. I have agreed with those recommendations, and will introduce a number of changes in order to maintain the effectiveness of the scheme and ensure that all available resources are targeted at those most in need of help to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

My officials recently completed a consultation exercise on the proposed changes. Over 90% of respondents supported the changing of the eligibility criteria. The main changes to the scheme are the removal of the 60-plus age restriction, which will allow heating measures to be made available to all eligible applicants of any age; the opening of the scheme to the working fuel poor and young families in receipt of working tax credits; ensuring that all applicants to the scheme receive a benefit-entitlement check; and funding these changes by focusing the heating element of the scheme on those fuel poor households with no central heating, or with solid fuel, Economy 7 or liquid petroleum gas heating.

We have a growing renewable energy industry in Northern Ireland, and I want to see that industry continue to prosper. I am keen to introduce renewable technologies to the warm homes scheme, particularly in hard-to-treat rural homes. I am convinced that renewable technologies — such as wood-pellet boilers — could prove a viable alternative to oil and gas.

**Mr Neeson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I should declare an interest: I am a member of the board of Carrickfergus Enterprise Agency. First, is the Minister aware that already, quite a large number of people across Northern Ireland who have been involved in the installation of home insulation have been made redundant because of the changes in the warm homes scheme? Will the Minister assure me that she will intervene in that? Secondly, is the Minister aware of a parliamentary inquiry at Westminster in relation to the warm homes scheme in Great Britain?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I am aware of the parliamentary inquiry at Westminster: when that has been completed, I will undoubtedly receive a report about it. Regarding the first part of the Member's question, he has already written to me on that issue several weeks ago.

New managers for the scheme will be appointed shortly, following a competitive tendering procedure. I have increased the warm homes budget for the next financial year, starting later this week, and that — together with the fact that the scheme has been refocused — should mean, if anything, that there will be more work to be carried out than in the previous year.

I am fully conscious of the issues that the Member has raised with me about contractors, but until the new managers have been appointed, I cannot get involved.

**Miss McIlveen:** Will the Minister explain how she intends to deal with those who are vulnerable, have been on the waiting list for a long time and will not meet the new criteria?

**The Minister for Social Development:** It is well known that the warm homes scheme has been hugely popular and oversubscribed and that its budget for this financial year has been exhausted. The Department will meet its target to assist 9,000 homes. At present, there are 5,858 expressions of interest from people who are waiting for help from the warm homes scheme, of whom 3,167 should receive insulation measures when the new scheme managers are appointed and the new scheme is introduced.

My officials have also been working with the current scheme manager, Eaga, to identify people on the waiting list whose heating systems have broken down beyond repair, and I am pleased to confirm that all those households — about 34 — will have heating installed in April. The remaining applicants have functioning heating systems; they may be inefficient, but they are still working. However, if those people believe that they meet the new criteria, they are welcome to apply to the new scheme when it opens later this year.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If an elderly person in their 90s has hitherto been unaware of the warm homes scheme, will

their application be processed quickly on the grounds of age and objective need? When will funding become available to meet the requirements of new applicants? Can something be done to raise the scheme's profile in isolated rural areas to which the message has not yet got through?

**The Minister for Social Development:** There are several parts to that question, which I will take in reverse order.

The last part deals with promotion and enhancement of the scheme in the wider media, which is an issue that could be taken up. My simple advice to the elderly person is to apply to the scheme. We are not here as determiners — that is a matter for scheme managers, who will assess a particular scheme.

The warm homes scheme has been particularly popular, not only with those who have benefited from it but with those who seek to benefit from it and with the wider Assembly. That is why it has exhausted its budget this year. In energy-efficiency terms, the scheme has proved most effective. In fact, during this financial year, I also received funding from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to deal with hard-to-heat rural homes. Therefore, much joint working can continue to be done on warm homes.

### New York/Washington Visit

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Social Development for an assessment of her recent visit to New York and Washington. (AQO 2450/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I had a very productive visit to the United States from 12 March to 18 March. My programme included engagements in New York City; in the state of Maryland; and in Washington DC. The timing of the visit also allowed me to participate in the St Patrick's Day programme in Washington DC, including President Obama's White House reception.

The US visit enabled me to further develop links with the new Administration and with a wide range of senior political representatives and officials at federal, state and city-government levels. I also had discussions with significant organisations in the US not-for-profit sector. Many of those individuals, institutions and organisations can contribute to furthering work across my Department, particularly on housing, urban regeneration and on the development of an effective shared-future agenda for action to tackle the legacy of division, disadvantage and deprivation that still plagues our community.

**Mr A Maginness:** Did the Minister get any ideas or did she receive an agenda, particularly for housing, from those with whom she discussed shared-future issues?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The delivery of a shared future is a major challenge for us all. Most people in Northern Ireland want to live in mixed communities; however, we still largely live in divided communities. That is why I put a shared future — as Mr Maginness knows — at the heart of the new housing agenda and why I am developing more shared-future housing in new developments and on existing estates.

However, I do not underestimate how difficult that will be. Some people still want to live in the divided past and not embrace the new future.

4.00 pm

I welcomed the opportunity to visit the United States to hear at first hand about the experience of Washington, DC and New York in tackling division and racism, particularly in areas of the south Bronx, Newark and Harlem. I heard about how people worked together on mixed housing developments, and some mixed residential areas have been successfully established in the US. The work was largely driven by attempts to establish affordable housing in mixed-income communities. I welcomed the opportunity to hear directly about their difficulties and successes. I am determined to deliver housing that will bring people together, rather than continue to keep them apart.

I thought it important, politically, to ensure that Irish America remains engaged with Northern Ireland. I want to make sure that Irish America extends the same level of support to building reconciliation and a shared future as it did to ending the violence and providing support, encouragement and solidarity during the establishment of the political institutions under the Good Friday Agreement. I am confident that Irish America will remain with us for the long haul and will help us to deal with issues of reconciliation and healing.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry, but the Minister's time is up. You have been pipped at the post, Mr Kennedy. We must now return to the earlier debate.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Report of the Committee on Procedures on Inquiry into Assembly Questions

#### *Debate resumed on motion:*

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on the Inquiry into Assembly Questions. — [*The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr Storey).*]

**Mr P Ramsey:** I support the report of the Committee on Procedures. The SDLP supports the report's proposals and hopes that they succeed, particularly in moving Question Time to a new place. In time, perhaps soon, Question Time might be further, and potentially radically, restructured.

For the public, Question Time in the House of Commons, the Dáil and the Scottish Parliament is an occasion on which the character and quality of the Members and Ministers are tested and conclusions are drawn. Issues of public interest or concern can be explored, probed and expanded, although, too often, none of that happens. Question Time is when the vigour, challenge and dynamic of the life of an Assembly and the nature of democracy can be expressed, or otherwise.

If Members are honest, Question Time in the Assembly only occasionally achieves those standards; too often it is a bit damp and soggy. Question Time could, therefore, soon undergo further radical restructuring to take it beyond the practice and conventions of other Assemblies and Parliaments.

A radically restructured Question Time could have several new features. The practice of putting diary questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister could be introduced, as during Prime Minister's questions at Westminster. Here, the practice would enable Members to probe the First Minister and deputy First Minister, without going through the ritual of providing specific questions in advance to which answers can be prepared. That could clearly liberate Question Time by testing the mettle of Ministers and Members.

The Assembly could adopt Westminster's practice of asking topical questions as part of questions to a Minister. Each Minister answers topical questions that have emerged after questions for oral answer have been tabled. Topical questions relate to fairly recent events that are of public interest or concern, and their relevance here is self-evident.

**Mr McCarthy:** Does the Member agree that today's Question Time provided evidence of the problems that he has described? Between four and six questions were put to each Minister, who rambled to such an extent that Members could not ask supplementary questions. Time is being wasted by Ministers making long, rambling speeches.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Members and Ministers could improve in that respect.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr P Ramsey:** A mechanism could be created to permit a Member to ask a series of supplementary questions. That would enable Members to probe Ministers more effectively than the current set-piece questions and answers permit.

US Congress and Senate members often remark that the model used during Prime Minister's Questions at Westminster is a feature and a theatre that is missing from their democratic system.

That model could be adopted here, without being prescriptive. One method would be to permit each Assembly group, on a rota basis, to name a Member who would be given an opportunity to ask a series of supplementary questions to a Minister. That would require detailed logistical consideration, but the acceptance of such a principle would help to liberate Question Time.

An easier model would involve leaving the opportunity to ask supplementary questions to the call of the Speaker or Deputy Speaker, enabling a series of supplementary questions to be asked by a Member when the Speaker judges a matter to be of heightened public interest or concern, or, as the Member who intervened said, when the Minister is not answering questions in the appropriate way.

Those suggestions are indicative of what could be done. In my view, beyond the report, there are things that may need to be done soon. We have worked long to create a shared democracy. We have agreed, with various degrees of enthusiasm, particular models of Government to make our democracy work. We live in a parliamentary system, which has been crafted to our conditions. Therefore, why not create, in the conduct of Question Time, a model that stretches Ministers and Members in order to ensure that community and democracy are better served?

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Members for participating in the debate. I also thank the Deputy Chairperson for stepping in for me in my absence; I appreciate it. During my winding-up speech, I will try to address some of the issues that were raised by Members. However, first, I will make my own observations, and then I will come to the issues that Members would like to see addressed.

In general, it is true to say that most Members have been complimentary of most, if not all, of the report, and they have been generally happy with the whole thrust of it.

We all have an interest in Assembly Questions. They are a tool that every Member uses to a greater or lesser extent. Every Member has his or her opinion on

questions, as the Committee found out when it conducted its survey of Members. Therefore, trying to find ways to tackle the issues around questions was not always an easy task.

There are two types of questions — those for oral or written answer — and it seemed to us that questions for oral answer cause the most disgruntlement among Members. It will come as no surprise that the issues identified as causing problems included the length and content of ministerial responses, which have just been referred to. Members described how frequently they felt that the answer did not address the question. The issue of precooked replies was also raised. Sometimes, it seems as though Ministers have prepared a reply that they are going to read out, irrespective of the question that has been posed. They have a prepared answer in front of them, and they just trot it out.

The Committee did not single out any particular Minister as being the biggest culprit, but there is no guarantee that we will not name him or her in the next report, because the Committee is very focused on the issue. All Committee members are very robust in dealing with the issues, and if we feel that someone is worthy of being named, we will name them. That is not a threat — it is a promise. After all, the longer Ministers take to answer questions, the fewer questions they will get through.

The Committee looked at the issue in some depth and spent considerable time debating imposing time limits. Members will find information on time limits at pages 17 to 19 of the report. However, in the end, it would have made little difference, as roughly the same number of questions would have been answered anyway. In fact, the only way to increase the number of questions being answered is to reduce the number of supplementary questions or to increase the time from 30 to 35 or 40 minutes.

The Committee is not recommending either of those options at the moment. It is during supplementary questions that the Minister is most tested and Members have the best opportunity to probe for information. Reducing the number of supplementary questions allowed would, in the opinion of the Committee, be detrimental.

Reducing the number of questions listed to 15 simply recognises what everyone already knows: that a target of 20 questions is totally unrealistic and unachievable. The Committee, in recommending a change to 15 questions, also took into account the work and effort put in by Departments in preparing for each listed question.

Some Members may think that there is nothing wrong with listing 20 questions and that, if a question is not reached by a Minister, then at least a written reply will be provided. However, written replies are not the point of questions for oral answer. Questions

for oral answer are one of the few face-to-face opportunities for Members to interact with Ministers, and hoping for a written reply really misses the point.

The change to the current shuffle system will also hopefully reduce the amount of nugatory work that is currently undertaken by Members. The mechanics of the new proposal have already been outlined by the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, and I will address the rationale behind it. Members have always said that the most valuable resource that they have is time. Therefore, any system that saw 80% of their work wasted needed to be examined. Now, only 15 Members per Minister will need to prepare a question, and will have plenty of notice that their name be selected.

All of that should hopefully provide for more topical questions, or at least allow an opportunity for current issues to be addressed. The Committee believes that the reduction in notice to the Minister is workable, because it is matched by a reduction in the number of questions they must prepare for.

One of the major recommendations of the report is a change to having Question Time on both Mondays and Tuesdays. The Committee suggests that Members try that and see what happens. There are many reasons for that change, not least the difficulty of having to sit through an hour and a half of questions and answers. Having one hour on a Monday followed by a further half hour on a Tuesday should make that process easier. The Committee feels that the change is worth trying, and as was said earlier, the new process is not set in stone.

Furthermore, the Committee hopes that the division over two days will facilitate visitors and members of the public. If anything could be called the jewel in the crown in relation to Assembly procedures, then Question Time is it — or at least it should be. Introducing time slots on both Mondays and Tuesdays will broaden opportunities for public access, which is something that we all want to encourage.

The Committee also tackled the issue of friendly fire or partisanship. All Members know that it happens and that parties can load the shuffle when their Minister is up, but this can have a negative consequence. Although friendly fire can be a useful tool to allow a Minister to announce a decision or a party to state its position, it can be and is viewed by the public in a different light. Indeed, the short-term gain of giving a Minister an easier time can come across very negatively to viewers in the Public Gallery and to those watching on TV.

Therefore, the Committee's recommendation is that the first question should not come from a Member of the same party as the Minister. It is recognised that that will have a limited effect, but it would have been totally unfair to apply that to more than one question. As has been witnessed today, normally only five to six

questions are answered, so limiting more than one question would be unfair. However, at least that recommendation would send a clear signal to the public that we, as elected representatives, are serious about holding Ministers to account. The operation of that particular recommendation has been left with the Speaker.

The rota and schedule of Ministers appearing before the Assembly for questions for oral answer was also examined in some depth by the Committee. As it stands, the rota allows for Ministers to appear every four weeks and for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to appear every two weeks. The Committee found that there was no issue with the rota for Ministers; it did not arise as an issue in our gathering of evidence, and we are content to leave it at that.

I am personally very disappointed that a member of the Committee felt compelled to release the report to the press before it could come before the Assembly. I suspect that the Member who brought it to the press would be the first on their feet if a Minister divulged something without coming to the House first. That is regrettable, but those are the parameters within which we have to work, and we will just get on with the job.

4.15 pm

As Members will have heard, however, the issue of the frequency of appearance of the First Minister and deputy First Minister created substantial interest. The fortnightly appearance started in the Assembly's first mandate, and it was based on the belief that, as heads of the Executive, the First Minister and deputy First Minister would be answering questions on a range of Executive issues that cut across all Departments. In reality, however, that is not the case. The First Minister and deputy First Minister do not answer questions that are more properly within the remit of other Ministers, and I do not think that any Members would want them to answer for other Ministers.

If, as the evidence suggests, the First Minister and deputy First Minister answer questions on only five broad areas, one might ask whether there is any need for them to come to the Assembly fortnightly. Well, the answer from the Committee is yes. After much discussion, there was agreement that their role — and the public's perception of that role — was so important that a reduction of their scheduled appearances would be seen as undermining that role.

A similar discussion was held on whether the junior Ministers should be allowed to answer questions on behalf of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee wanted to ensure that there was no erosion — perceived or real — of the unique and special role of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We do not believe that allowing the juniors to answer questions on those areas for which they have specific responsibility would be an erosion of that role.

I will try to respond to the issues on questions for written answer. The Committee was aware of unease and disquiet from Members on the poor performance by Ministers in answering questions for written answer. The Committee looked at the figures from May 2007 and was alarmed that the performance was worse than expected. We took evidence in that area and received assurances that improvements were being made. However, the Committee will keep a watchful eye, and will call to account any Department that shows a tendency to let its performance drop.

There are also two recommendations on questions for priority written answer, with which some Members may not be happy. The first is that only one per day of the five questions for written answer can be a priority. Unfortunately, that recommendation has come about because of the overuse and, indeed, the abuse of the facility. I think that most Members will recognise that.

Questions for priority written answer create considerable resource problems for Departments, and the Committee on Procedures has some sympathy with that. We would rather that staff were doing their jobs and delivering front line services than scrambling around to get a reply to a question for priority written answer. Furthermore, we know that the overuse of the facility is something for which the Departments have to take responsibility. Their poor performance in answering ordinary questions for written answer drove Members to try the priority route. We hope that recommendations 8 and 9 will encourage Members to use the facility sparingly and only when really required.

Mr McCartney welcomed the report and its findings, and he noted that the reduction in the number of questions for oral answer is practical. He is a member of the Committee and is conversant with the debate that took place in the Committee as the report was discussed.

Basil McCrea, too, welcomed the report and raised the issue of supplementary questions. He said that he would like to see some relaxation in the Speaker's ruling on supplementary questions keeping to the topic. Well, that cuts both ways, and although it is an important point and a good point to raise, that is a responsibility of all Members.

Mr O'Loan spoke about Ministers stepping out of their straitjackets and answering questions. Good advice, but could I also give the advice to Members — if they are interested in taking it — that maybe we, too, could step out of our straitjackets.

This matter relates not only to Ministers wearing those straitjackets; it relates to other Members. I will later provide some interesting statistics that may be of interest to Members about what happened in the Chamber today.

Mr O'Loan raised concerns about the junior Ministers answering questions on behalf of the First Minister and

the deputy First Minister. Mr O'Loan was also part of the Committee's discussion, so he knows exactly what the deliberations were on that issue. It has to be said that no grouping came out strongly in favour of a change. Therefore, it is fairly clear that the Committee was happy that the situation should continue as it is. However, as we keep emphasising, none of this is set in stone; it all can be revisited and reviewed when Members feel that that is necessary.

Mr Neeson welcomed splitting Question Time over two days, and he noted how some Members abuse questions for written answer. He raised an important point about the cost of replying to questions for written answer, which was a matter that the Committee looked at. We discovered that, for instance, an answer from the Department of Education costs twice as much as an answer from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which is run by the same party. That is most interesting, and it is something that the Committee will continue to look at.

Lord Browne welcomed the report, and he noted the importance of Question Time in Parliaments the world over, including the House of Lords. In his short contribution, Mr Brolly stated that Ministers should follow his example and provide short and concise replies. They might take his advice, but I am not quite sure. Mr Elliott stated that he believes that the proposed recommendations will improve questions for oral answer. He also believes that some Members abuse the facility of questions for written answer, and he asked the Committee to consider introducing a procedure that allows questions to be asked on more topical or current issues. I noted what the First Minister said. We will take note of all the issues that were raised here today, and the Committee will revisit them.

If we look at attendance in the House at Question Time, the best that we could get today was less than one third of Members. Ministers cannot be blamed for that. If Members take Question Time seriously, it is their responsibility to be in their places. The most Members that were in the Chamber at any given time today was 38, but at one point, there were as few as 28.

My time has run out. I would like to have said many other things about what Mr Ramsey said, but we have noted his points, and the Committee will look at all the issues again.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on the Inquiry into Assembly Questions.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Financial Pressures on Householders

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

**Mr Hamilton:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the difficult economic conditions as a result of the global economic downturn; notes the impact on household bills; notes the increase in the regional rate during the period of devolution between 1999 and 2002, and again under direct rule between 2002 and 2007; notes the freeze in the domestic regional rate; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that every possible step is taken to reduce pressure on the bills of householders.

As is the case for so many of the debates that we now have in the Assembly, the context of this debate is the ongoing economic downturn, which is putting tremendous and unprecedented pressures on many people and their financial capabilities. We have all seen the impact that it is having on individuals and on companies and businesses in our own areas. All across Northern Ireland we see job losses; indeed, some disturbing news is coming out of Nortel in Newtownabbey today, but there is even worse than that in what we hear about company closures. There is an overall crisis in confidence among consumers right across Northern Ireland, and that reflects problems that are worldwide in their nature.

That is putting serious pressure on people's ability to spend what money or disposable income they have. Members should be mindful of what steps we are taking to assist those people and to ensure that we are not taking steps that would put additional unwanted and unnecessary pressures on difficult household budgets.

If possible, I want to sketch out the situation that the Minister, and the Minister's colleague Mr Robinson, the former Finance Minister and now First Minister, inherited in respect of rates in Northern Ireland. When they took office, it was universally recognised that there was an unfair rating system as the result of a move away from rental values to capital values on properties, which, if Members can cast their minds back, led to the phrase "asset rich, income poor". Realistically, about 40% of people saw an increase and, in some cases, a doubling of their rates bills overnight.

A norm of high rates bills in Northern Ireland was also inherited; people and businesses were being well

and truly walloped by the rating system. Between 1999 and 2000, when devolution was put in place under the Belfast Agreement, to 2007, which was when the new system was put in place, there was an 85% increase in the domestic regional rate — a crazy amount of money over an eight-year period. In 1999-2000, the domestic regional rate was 107·13p, and in 2002-03, which was the end of devolution, it was 132·47p — an increase of nearly 25%. However, during direct rule in 2006-07, it rose to 198·17p — an increase of 49%. Overall, that represents an 85% increase. We can all remember the 19% rise in 2006-07, and in the two previous years the increases were about 9%. The recent historical picture of rates in Northern Ireland has been one of massive increases, which severely affected householders and businesses in Northern Ireland.

It is worth paying attention to how businesses in Northern Ireland were bashed. Members can recall how we opposed the escalation of industrial rates in Northern Ireland to a position where 100% rates would have been the case in a couple of years from now. Of course, at that time there were all manner of warnings from those in the manufacturing sector that up to 30,000 jobs could be lost in that vital sector.

Inheriting that situation was difficult. The people of Northern Ireland had put in a great deal of money over that period — some 85% more in their rates bills — but were not necessarily getting 85% better services. When we took control of the rating system, we had a duty to behave much better with it. People had expected 19% and 9% increases — which would have been the way it was in Northern Ireland. However, there was an onus on the new Administration to behave much more prudently and to be much more fiscally responsible. I am glad to say that that is how the Executive have behaved.

The Minister of Finance and his predecessor have set out on a course of action that has, if not entirely relieved the pain that people are feeling, has certainly done some good in ensuring that people are no longer being bludgeoned by the rating system, and has also stopped bashing people with very high rates bills. The Minister has used the rating system as a means of helping people through their pain.

I outlined some problems earlier, such as the unfairness of the system. The introduction of a rates cap of £500,000, which was recently reduced to £400,000, has ensured that some of those who were deemed to be asset rich but income poor — those who had big properties but not necessarily much income — are being better protected by the rating system than previously.

Reducing the cap to £400,000 also ensured that our highest bills were in line with those in the highest band of council tax in England and Wales.

4.30 pm

Even better than that was the introduction of changes to some of the reliefs in the rating system. When we consider some of the measures that have been introduced during this first period of devolution in Northern Ireland, one of the Finance Minister's finest achievements has been the introduction of the lone pensioner allowance, which is an automatic 20% reduction in rates bills for those who are over 70 and live alone. In the very short time that that mechanism has been in existence, it has helped 17,000 people who are over 70 and live alone in Northern Ireland. That is worth a total of £2·6 million, which is an average saving of £156 for every one of those 17,000 individuals who have availed themselves of that relief. That is a very positive measure in which we can all take pride.

There have also been changes to the level of savings that qualify for rates relief. It had been £15,000, but that has now increased to £60,000, which assists a greater number of people than had been the case in the past.

We had all become used to the historically high rates in Northern Ireland, but that situation has been radically changed courtesy of the decision of DUP Finance Ministers to freeze the domestic regional rate for a three-year period. Compared to even an inflationary rate increase of around 2·7% over that period, that is saving ratepayers in Northern Ireland some £7·8 million each year. When that is coupled with the deferral of water charges for two years, it saves the average household well in excess of £1,000 each year.

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

When that is considered with some of the measures that other Executive Ministers have introduced — such as free prescriptions, which is worth £13 million; and the extension of free transport for the elderly to those who are over 60, which is worth £18 million — one can see real and meaningful ways in which Executive Ministers are taking action to help people at these difficult times. I could also mention the £8 million rates assistance package that the Minister recently announced in order to help local district councils to ease some of the pain that their ratepayers are enduring.

We could also consider the help that has been on offer to businesses. The capping of the industrial rate at 30% has undoubtedly helped businesses in these difficult times. A business regional rate freeze, which the Minister announced before Christmas 2008, is worth £8 million to businesses in Northern Ireland. The small business rates-relief scheme that the Minister intends to bring forward is worth another £8 million to commerce in Northern Ireland. Those are all positive steps that are being taken to help businesses and, therefore, to help the individuals who work for those companies to keep their jobs in place.

I would not, for a second, say that our rating system in Northern Ireland is in any way perfect. I am minded to paraphrase Winston Churchill by saying that rates are the worst form of local taxation except for all the rest. However, compared to the inherited position in 2007, the rating system in Northern Ireland is much improved. It has the explicit aim of assisting householders and businesses; especially through these very difficult and challenging times. It not only tries to ensure that people have a bit more money; it also encourages people who are entitled to those reliefs to take those up. I am very encouraged by the cross-departmental working group that is in place. It is working with the A2B group to try to get more people to take up the reliefs that are available to them.

We have no difficulty with the amendment because helping those who are in the worst-possible position — those who are on very low incomes — is something that we all support. Some of the measures that have been brought forward — not just through the rating system — such as free transport for the elderly and free prescriptions will certainly help those who are on very low incomes. It is my pleasure to move the motion, and I ask the House to support it.

**Dr Farry:** I beg to move the following amendment:  
At end insert

“in particular through targeting measures at those householders on low incomes.”

I am surprised by the motion because it has a certain air of self-congratulation about it, particularly bearing mind that that there is very little that is new in the way of proposals to improve the current situation. The motion very much looks backwards. Complacency can be a dangerous thing at the best of times, but it is particularly so in the context of a recession.

The Alliance Party cannot support the motion as it appears in the Order Paper — it is somewhat motherhood and apple pie. However, that is purely on a stand-alone basis.

In the wider context of the recession, we have other comments to make about the Executive's policy. It is logical in a recession to protect household income — indeed, to boost it to generate additional economic activity. However, the focus should be on those on lower incomes, and that is the logic behind the Alliance Party's amendment. I must say that the Executive's record in that regard is mixed.

The Alliance Party has reservations about the thrust of the motion and the comments that have been made. In part, that is because they come across as the Executive's giving themselves a pat on the back for their response to the recession. It is a bit early to be giving ourselves a pat on the back.

It is interesting to note that when Ministers — particularly those from the DUP — are asked what

they are doing to combat the recession, the knee-jerk reaction is to fall back on the freeze on the regional rate. In a sense, they are deluding themselves if they think that that amounts to a credible economic policy, let alone a coherent response to an economic crisis. In a recession Governments should, at the very least, seek to avoid raising taxes; indeed, there is a good argument for lowering them. The argument behind that approach is that it gives people additional spending power that, in turn, will boost economic activity.

**Mr Kennedy:** Can the Member say whether he and his party are still in favour of tax-raising powers for the Assembly?

**Dr Farry:** Absolutely; there is a groundswell of opinion that the Assembly needs more power to make a bigger impact rather than slavishly follow policies elsewhere. Moreover, tax-varying powers do not mean higher taxes; they mean different taxes and a different way of doing things. We have a strong record on corporation tax in that respect.

There are two dangers to the approach that I outlined. The first is that people will simply save the money rather than spend it, particularly given economic uncertainties. Those who are most likely to spend money are those on lower incomes who do not have the luxury of making the choice between saving and spending.

The second danger is that too much emphasis is placed on consumption for today rather than on investment for tomorrow. If money has to be spent, it is sometimes better if Government spend it because one can rely on them to spend the money rather than simply save it.

Coming on top of the existing distortions in our public expenditure profile, not least from the costs of managing a divided society, the populist approach taken by the Executive has further restrained our ability to invest in recovery. Just look at our disappointing commitment to the green economy when all other regions are moving in that direction. There has been a massive failure to identify and invest what could be seen as Northern Ireland's new competitive advantage. Consider our inability to respond to the investment strategy, which was knocked off course through capital realisation not going ahead as planned. The way to respond would have been through transferring resources from revenue to pick up the shortfall in capital investment. Industry is crying out for that capital investment to be followed through. Perhaps that will answer the Minister's bemusement about why people are so disappointed that the Executive cannot even meet their own target of £1.8 billion for capital investment for this year, let alone trying to take it further as other jurisdictions are seeking to do.

Having taken account of our economy and the powers that we have available to us, and having put

them into a proper context, we still conclude that Northern Ireland is not getting a fiscal stimulus on the scale of our competitors.

The DUP understands some of the logic and points that we are making about the dangers of people saving money rather than spending it — consider their spokespersons' response to the UK Government's decision to cut VAT by 2.5%. Therefore, it is even more disappointing when they feel compelled to play the populist tune at home, given that they seem to understand the point that we are making.

The freeze in the regional rate has perhaps been the most celebrated aspect of the Executive's policies, but let us not forget that not every household pays rates; some people, particularly those on low incomes, pay none. Therefore, those who benefit most from the rates freeze tend to be the better off who are more likely to save than to spend.

By contrast, those on lower incomes tend to depend proportionately more on quality public services. There are clear opportunity costs for the lost revenue from the Executive's policy on rates. Most Members are acutely aware of the serious underfunding of some of our public services, including the Health Service, a point to be noted by my colleagues on the left — or on the right, depending on which way one looks at them.

There are also opportunity costs in respect of business, growing our economy, reinvesting resources and incentivising certain economic activities. It is worth noting the criticism that the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and others levelled against the regional rate freeze; it is there in the CBI's response to the draft Budget in December 2007. The DUP has graduated to lambasting economists in their ivory towers, rather than engaging in serious arguments about what it is doing.

On rates in general, the system of property values is a blunt instrument for measuring ability to pay; a local income tax, as a replacement rather than a top-up of the rates, would be fairer. I acknowledge the various rates reliefs that have been offered by the Executive. However, rate-capping is a blunt instrument and has a considerable dead weight in economic terms.

**Mr Hamilton:** Before he moves on to rates-capping — his position on which he has outlined to the House many times — the Member has set out such opposition to the regional rates freeze that I would like him to confirm to the House whether he and his party are, indeed, opposed to it, as I detect from his tone. Whatever he might say, he must acknowledge that the rates freeze is helping people in Northern Ireland during these very difficult times. Is his party opposed to the regional rates freeze?

**Dr Farry:** The Member knows well that we did not oppose the proposal for a rates freeze this year. In the

context of a recession, we felt that the Executive had stumbled into doing the right thing for the wrong reason. However, the long-term strategy is flawed.

Returning to the rates cap, the DUP may argue that it had nothing to do with the £500,000 cap, but it certainly brought forward the £400,000 cap. There is transitional relief for district councils, but it is only a two-year stay of execution. The impact across Northern Ireland may be fairly minimal, but, just to put that in perspective, the net effect of the rates cap in particular localities and district council areas will be in excess of an inflation rise in the regional rate. The Executive's policy will cause a rates hike in excess of an inflationary rise in the regional rate. Therefore, they are patting themselves on the back with one hand and putting the other hand into people's pockets.

The Executive had the potential to do something worthwhile in respect of the financial assistance payments. However, it must be stressed that the supposed £150 winter fuel payments have not yet been made. According to DSD, those payments will be out in April, so they will, in fact, be spring fuel payments. It can be argued that people on low incomes —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Dr Farry:** Sorry, I am running out of time.

It can be argued that people on low incomes were told that those fuel payments would come. However, the payments will only be of assistance if people have confidence in the Executive to follow through on them and the cash flow to spend the money on fuel during the winter in the knowledge that their money will be replenished in the spring. Where people — often pensioners — live a hand-to-mouth existence, that is rarely the case.

In England and Wales, measures were coming through in September 2008. However, it was only in December that we decided what we were going to do, and we then had to go through the process of introducing the necessary legislation. In a broader context, we have to acknowledge that there is a problem of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland and that businesses' energy costs are greater here than elsewhere. That is an argument for investing to deal with energy efficiency and investing in renewables.

I will make two further points, one of which is our relationship with the UK Treasury. There are a number of important issues, including the new efficiency savings, the possible review of the Barnett formula, and the package for the devolution of policing and justice. The rates burden in Northern Ireland is less than that in the rest of the UK. However, our incomes are lower overall, so there are very good reasons for that, and I would be wary about pushing that point. I was rather surprised to see the Finance Minister patting himself on the back and saying how low our rates are

compared with the rest of the UK. I trust that that will not be his opening line in the next stage of delicate negotiations with the Treasury.

The other argument —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Dr Farry:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Kennedy:** Dr Farry might get that big job.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr McLaughlin:** The last Member queried what the motion is about, and I must say that I have the same question. I am not as inclined as others to suggest that it has anything to do with forthcoming elections.

4.45 pm

There is no particular fault with the restatement of the measures that have been taken to alleviate the impact of the financial downturn, and, for that reason, I hope that the proposers of the motion and those of the amendment can find an accommodation. One complements the other.

**Mr B McCrea:** Consensus.

**Mr McLaughlin:** I am glad to hear the Ulster Unionist Party advocating that approach. That is a good idea — it should try it some time.

Having taken the motion at face value, I should outline one caveat. I find it surprising, in view of who proposed the motion, that it focuses on the Minister of Finance and Personnel. As I have stated during previous debates in the Assembly, there is a shared responsibility, and every Minister can make a contribution. Each Minister should approach this matter on the basis of both individual and collective responsibility. There are limitations on what the Executive can bring forward. The measures that are identified and listed in the motion — and that were referred to by the two Members who spoke last — indicate that those issues have been addressed.

In wider society, some may think that we have not been sufficiently challenging or creative in our thinking. We have not challenged the rules of engagement as dictated by the Treasury or the limitations on fiscal powers that are available to Assemblies such as this.

We attended an interesting meeting with members of a House of Lords Committee that is looking at the Barnett formula. That has significant implications, not only for this Assembly, but for devolved Assemblies in the future. It was reported to us that there is a feeling in Westminster that current arrangements under the Barnett formula are too generous to the North. We should take that signal seriously.

Gordon Brown's stated objective of driving forward so-called efficiency savings will take money from the

North. In effect, that will mean cuts to front line services, and it will significantly circumscribe the ability of the Executive to alleviate the financial pressures felt by households.

The motion focuses on households because we have previously debated the impacts on industry and commerce — the drivers of our economy. However, at grassroots level, many are facing extreme difficulty in staving off the rising cost of living and the threats to their ability to stay afloat economically. That is particularly the case in areas that have lived for generations with the stark reality of social and economic deprivation.

The Assembly needs to consider whether we have sufficient tools to do more than we have done already to address those issues.

**Mr B McCrea:** I understand that the Member is talking mainly about people, but rates also affect businesses. The huge increase in rates that has taken place in recent years puts many businesses at risk. If the businesses go bust, we will have no jobs, no community — nothing. If we do not get our rates take, and we do not get our Barnett consequentials, how can we raise the money?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr McLaughlin:** That intervention goes to the heart of the matter. A number of issues were addressed by the Committee, including free transport and support for both domestic and industrial rates. The Treasury interprets those matters in a particular way — it assumes that we have sufficient spare capacity in the block grant to enable us to do those things because they cannot be universally applied.

It becomes a double-edged sword. I would be very cautious about going too far down that particular road. Prior to restitution, the agreed position of all the parties in the negotiations with the Treasury was that the Barnett formula did not serve our economy well. The long-standing issue of underinvestment in infrastructure was a legacy issue for which the Executive and the Assembly were being asked to accept responsibility. Other pressures emerged within the existing arrangement, such as the equal-pay arrangements for civil servants and, on top of that, the economic tsunami.

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

**Mr McLaughlin:** I think that we have to be careful. We will support the motion, but be cautious about its implications.

**Mr McNarry:** Even with this morning's trailer in the 'News Letter', members of the public are still wondering what the motion is about. Let us do our best to enlighten them. Recently, in 'The Sunday Times', Liam Clarke wrote a clinical observation of those

handling our finances. It went something like this: first there is denial, followed by a crisis, and then there is panic. The DUP, I think, is still at the denial stage.

Like the bemused public, I, too, was mystified over the purpose of the motion. Then it struck me: it is a present from Mr Dodds to Mrs Dodds. The motion is Mr Dodds's way of giving Diane something for her campaign. It is his way of saying: "Yes dear, of course you can trust me. I know I've promised things before — I know I said I wouldn't sit in Government with Irish republicans, but then didn't we all? And, OK, yes I did say we wouldn't go into Government unless we got the £1 billion package, but look how I've turned that around, haven't I? And, yes dear, I know I promised lots of things and failed to deliver, but the voters didn't catch on." However, the voters have caught on. The game is up for Mr Dodds.

The "Hobbits" motion will pass. They will snipe and snigger, just as they have done. They will jump up and down and make interventions. Let them get on with it. We could vote on the motion now. Its purpose has been exposed for what it is — a silly stunt unworthy of the House. Populism is fine, especially if the DUP had brought home the bacon and delivered a £1 billion peace dividend. However, it did not. Now the DUP is, quite rightly, unpopular for breaking its promises.

A while ago, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury told us to expect a £180 million cut in our Budget as part of the United Kingdom-wide efficiency savings. That is on top of the £1 billion black hole — about which the DUP is in denial — in the public finances, and the DUP has the temerity to put this motion in front of the Assembly. It is nothing short of a stunt.

The householders referred to in the motion are part of the 42,000 people now on the dole. The DUP is fixed on driving a Programme for Government, fashioned when it has no backside left in its financial trousers. People who are already on the dole, or those fearing that they might become unemployed, are more worried about putting bread on the table, getting a job, or staying in the job that they have.

The private sector is being clobbered and will recoil with incredulity at such a crass motion. Thankfully, the public sector has cushioned us against the worst of the crisis. Without it, we would be in dire straits. That helps explain why our unemployment rate stands at 5.5%, which is better than the UK average. Given that the First Minister has already issued serious warnings about possible cuts in public-sector employment, it is stupefying in its utter crassness to watch his Finance Minister mishandle the crisis. "What crisis?", the DUP would say — ask the 42,000 people on the dole, "What crisis?"

Six months ago, I asked that priorities be reordered to focus on job protection and job creation. Six months

later, the Minister admits that there is a need to revisit the economic actions and targets outlined in the Programme for Government. In October, when I raised the issue in the House, unemployment stood at 30,000. The most recent figure, for February 2009, is 42,000.

Let us have real action to reduce pressure on householders, and none of the nonsense to raise the expectations of householders when the money is not available to deliver. The 42,000 people who are unemployed do not want to hear the DUP telling them what they already know. As I said, the game is up, Mr Dodds. Do something about it.

**Mr O'Loan:** Obviously, I support the sentiments behind the motion and the amendment. My only concern is, as has been expressed by others, about the value of such a debate. The public will see that action is needed, not words. It is a private Member's motion, of which there have been many in the Assembly, particularly recently. Such motions are in place to fill the time that is not filled with Executive business. Recently, a full week passed in the Assembly in which no Executive business took place at all. That is being noticed by the public and by commentators.

The Assembly was elected to achieve Executive business and to hold the Executive to account on that business. We want to see action, not words. The best way to deal with such important issues is not to have a motion to debate them, but to see the Executive's response coming forward.

Given that the motion is being debated, I shall make a few remarks on the practical steps that the Executive can take. First, I express my real understanding and sympathy with the many families who are faced with real hardship. Many working families never thought that they would find themselves in a situation of financial distress, and many families do find themselves in that position.

Loss of incomes is the major issue, so our first focus should be on the maintaining of incomes as far as possible. I shall refer to some of the ways in which policy can be adjusted to do that. More can be done to protect the jobs of people who are under threat but who will be vital to their firms for the upturn when it happens. In countries such as Wales, Holland and Canada, specific measures have been taken on that issue, which I wish to see introduced here. That would provide support for firms to enable them to take advantage of the upturn and to support the incomes of households.

We have talked many times about the construction sector, and we know of the drastic effect of job losses to that industry. Recently, I spoke to a professional firm that is associated with the construction industry and which has cut all salaries by 20%. Such measures will not appear in the official statistics, but they cause a serious burden to the households of those families.

An opportunity exists to stimulate the economy through further contribution to the housing sector. Given that sector's high-labour content and its encouragement of apprenticeships and training, that would make a specific contribution to the economy that is unique, so there is a sound basis for saying that. I ask the Minister to give further consideration to that.

The depreciation in sterling provides an opportunity for tourism, and money should be diverted for the marketing of the tourism sector. That would bring a real likelihood of rapid payback.

Recently, a separate debate took place on the issue of dealing with debt. I acknowledge and welcome the action of DETI on that. Expenditure on debt advice has been doubled, and a specific budget has been created for telephone debt advice. I express particular appreciation to the Ulster Bank for its contribution of £300,000.

Every bank and financial institution, including every building society, that is implicitly involved in that area ought to follow the Ulster Bank's lead. I ask the Minister to do what he can in his contact with those banks. He can exercise significant political leverage, and I ask him to do so.

5.00 pm

Finally, let us not get bogged down in the short term. I refer briefly to what the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, said when he addressed the Confederation of British Industry Northern Ireland recently — *[Interruption.]*

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

**Mr O'Loan:** He promised to take a long-term strategic approach on the all-island economy and North/South co-operation.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member must resume his seat.

**Mr O'Loan:** He also pledged commitment to the roads programme. Let us be as courageous and strategic in the long term.

**Mr McQuillan:** At the outset, I thank my party colleagues for bringing the motion to the House and for the opportunity to speak in the debate. As Members are well aware, we live in a challenging time. However, there is no doubt in my mind that we would face even more difficulties had the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive not taken the steps that they have in the Programme for Government.

We are well aware of the constraints on all household budgets. However, I believe that the Minister is committed to ensuring that the Northern Ireland public will pay only the bare minimum for services. The Minister has frozen regional rates and has followed that up with an announcement, which was made prior to Christmas, that he will make £8 million available to

the 26 district-council areas in order to ensure that the district rate will be kept at a minimum that is affordable to householders throughout Northern Ireland.

It is also important that the older generation is looked after, because elderly people will become more vulnerable during these difficult times. It must be ensured that older people apply for and receive all the benefits to which they are entitled, such as that which gives homeowners in receipt of pensions the ability to defer payments on their rates bills and relief for those who have invested in energy-saving methods. Free travel for the older generation has also been implemented at a cost of £4 million each year.

Prescription charges have been reduced, and free prescriptions will be available from 2010-11. It is also welcome news that the Minister has given further consideration to extending the fuel credit scheme to another 50,000 low-income homes, which will mean that 150,000 homes in total will receive a one-off £150 payment.

I also wish to record my thanks to the Minister for the negotiation of £100 million from Treasury for Civil Service back-pay claims that the Executive have inherited from the direct rule Administration. It is hoped that the matter will reach a satisfactory conclusion as soon as possible.

My party realises that during these difficult times, the Finance Minister and the Executive have taken their collective responsibility seriously and have listened to the true concerns that affect local people. My party also realises that there are no unlimited funds available to address all issues. Resources must be carefully managed in order to ensure that the best value for money is achieved for what is spent. By contrast, direct rule Ministers were too far removed from the local communities that are now served by the Assembly.

I support the motion and recommend that other Members do likewise.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. As other Members have said, the House should, perhaps, question the timing of the motion and this debate. However, it is a take-note debate.

Simon Hamilton certainly referred to action that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has taken to freeze rates. He did not say much about the last part of his motion, which calls on the Minister to ensure that pressure on household bills is kept to a minimum, or is reduced, if at all possible. Other Members have mentioned ways that that could be done. It will be interesting to hear what the Minister says in response to that. On other occasions, the Minister has pointed out that he does not distribute money — the Executive do. I wish to ask him what discussions are taking place

in the Executive at present on measures to help ordinary people.

Certainly, much has been made of the rates freeze. I accept that. I am concerned about the economic impact in places such as Strabane and Omagh in my constituency of West Tyrone. The figures were outlined in response to a question from Mr Hamilton. Despite what Dr Farry said, we cannot ignore that matter. I am keen to hear the Minister's comments about ordinary people — and I do not use that term pejoratively — and ordinary households.

The warm homes scheme's attempts to alleviate fuel poverty are welcome. During Question Time, a Member on the opposite Benches pressed Minister Ritchie about the scheme's new criteria. I have encountered a situation where they apply. I have had a great deal of concern with one constituent — an elderly person in her 80s — who would have qualified under the previous criteria. However, since the report on and the review of the warm homes scheme, she does not qualify for changes to her heating system. I have asked the Minister for Social Development about that. Although what has been done is welcome, there is room for further improvement. My party colleague Mitchel McLaughlin referred to possible creative measures that the Executive could develop or use in their — or in the Assembly's — dealings with the Treasury.

Members received some information before the debate, including a report from ERINI. *[Interruption.]* I said ERINI, and I was particular about how I pronounced it; I think that I got it correct. ERINI (Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland) mentioned end-year flexibility. I am not particularly well versed in financial matters, but I know that when Peter Robinson was Minister of Finance and Personnel, during one of the Budget debates, he emphasised that Departments should do something about the matter in question. I asked several months ago whether there is an opportunity to use end-year flexibility to help those households that are on low incomes, as mentioned in the Alliance Party amendment. Finally, I ask the Minister comment on the anti-poverty strategy's current position in the Executive. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Shannon:** I support the motion and similar to the Member who moved the motion, I support the amendment.

We have heard a lot from the mainland about how the VAT rate has been cut in order to encourage spending and about how other initiatives are in play. In the past year, the average wage increase has resulted in the average working couple being £556 better off. However, given the tax increases, in some circumstances, the same couple might pay an extra £610 in tax — that demonstrates an anomaly. That fact has not been so well publicised.

The cost of living was increasing, and some conservative measures estimated it to be 23% in real terms when the increase in food costs in stores was considered. Given the increase in the price of basic foods such as potatoes, bread and rice, it is clear how and why families across the Province are struggling to make ends meet. It is also clear, therefore, that governmental aid must be offered. That aid has been coming through; for example, the Minister of Finance and Personnel pledged to deliver £1.4 billion in construction projects in this financial year, compared with £676 million five years ago. That will put wages into the pockets of people in the Province, and they can spend that money here. That money is helping schools, roads, hospitals and many other areas.

Over the next 10 years, the Department of Finance and Personnel will work closely with small and medium-sized enterprises to deliver £20 billion of capital projects through the investment strategy.

That delivery of projects to help construction and all supplementary businesses, such as suppliers and haulage firms, is a must if we are to bring ourselves out of the dip that we are in.

There is no doubt that when the Minister is summing up he will mention that taking the Conservative line to cut public spending would further increase unemployment, and people would struggle more. People who are struggling look to the Department of Finance and Personnel to implement changes, and at this time there are a lot more people looking to us to help improve their lives. Many middle-class families are struggling, losing their businesses, facing losing their homes and at this time are hoping for some kind of intervention.

Thus far the Minister has stepped up with 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. Again, those are positive measures. Let us recognise the positive measures that he has put forward. The Titanic signature project, with £43.5 million of investment as part of its own economic package, has been backed by the Executive, and the Finance Minister has expressed his determination that Ministers will do whatever they can to help families, companies and the economy.

He has acknowledged that we are operating with the constraints of a block allocation of money and do not have freedom of manoeuvre, but that does not stop the Minister and the Executive taking positive steps to help the people of the Province.

Ivryboadie knaws aboot the record tae noo, an' the bag decisions tuk, laike houldin' the regional rate fae 2008-2011; cappin' industrial rates aa 30%; an' freezin' business rates i real terms. Free prescriptions an' free public transport fer fowk owre 60 hes bein brocht in forebye, an' we ken the pressure this hes tuk awa' fae

hames wi' seekness aroun' the Province. Hit bes undooted at the Finance Depairtment an' hits Meenster hae tuk steps tae mak' this hairsd tim' a wee thing easier an' wul cairry oan daein this.

We are all aware of the record to date, and of the major decisions that have been taken, such as freezing the regional rate from 2008-2011; capping industrial rates at 30%; and freezing business rates in real terms. Free public transport for the over 60s and free prescriptions have also been introduced, and those measures have been met with relief in homes throughout the Province, especially by people who are suffering from illnesses. There is no doubt that the Department of Finance and the Minister have taken steps towards making this hard time a little easier, and will continue to do so.

Although I support the motion, I ask the Minister to do all that he can. I do so safe in the knowledge that he is making a difference, and that the steps that he is taking are practical by nature and will make a noticeable difference.

More houses are being sold this month than were sold last month, which is positive. Businesses are able to get bigger and better contracts, but that will take time to filter through to the people on the street to enable them to see the tangible differences that are clearly being made.

I know that the Minister is doing all in his power, and I, for one, place my wholehearted trust and support in him and the job that he is doing. It is not an easy job, and he needs support to do it. I urge Members in the Chamber to back the Minister and the Executive, to play their part in the Assembly, and thereby make lives better in the homes of the people whom we support and represent. I urge Members to support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Beggs:** Despite what the DUP thinks, Northern Ireland is actually part of the United Kingdom, and we are, therefore, subject to the United Kingdom's overall budgetary constraints. At the same time, of course, we receive the benefits of being part of one of the world's largest economies. Although in principle I strongly support low taxes and rates, we must remain fiscally responsible. There are no free lunches, and rates cuts or freezes must not be tax time bombs for households in the future.

Was it wise for the DUP to recently boast about the lower rates of tax in Northern Ireland, particularly when the House of Lords Barnett Formula Select Committee was here examining that formula? How will that boast be viewed by the Labour peers who were here? Do we risk having aggravated them, and perhaps risk the balance of the current Barnett formula and the funding that it allocates to Northern Ireland?

As elected politicians, we have been trusted by the public to deliver improvements in this region, particularly to the economy and public services. In many respects, the Minister of Finance should be the gatekeeper for that success. There is little point in making the economy the centre point of the Programme for Government if there is not enough money left over in the Budget and no effective means of evaluating how, and if, we are meeting those targets.

I have concerns about the situation in which we find ourselves; however, the DUP has blatantly ignored the mounting crisis faced by our Budget, particularly with regard to the capital expenditure programme.

5.15 pm

My colleagues and I have highlighted a range of pressures that have arisen, such as the inflated valuation of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute site at Crossnacreevy, the present levels of rate arrears, the failure of Workplace 2010 and ever-diminishing capital receipts — all of which are having a serious impact on the ability of the Executive to deliver. In many respects, the Programme for Government is becoming less meaningful by the day. It must be remembered that much of that capital expenditure can enable new investment and new efficiencies to occur; the Executive are making those aimed-for efficiencies more difficult to achieve.

I agree with the proposer of the amendment, who highlighted the self-congratulatory nature of the motion and, therefore, its weakness. This is schoolboy politics, which is designed to distract the public and the media from the real issues that we, as a region of the United Kingdom, are facing and hiding the embarrassment. Where is the £1 billion package? I recall that, at one stage, it was a £2 billion package. Was it not simply allowing us to reinvest our own assets to put better public provision in place? Nevertheless, with the reduction in property values, even that promised money — which was ours in the first place — appears to have disappeared, with huge implications for our capital expenditure plans.

Serious discussions should be taking place on how to address such weaknesses in our current Budget. However, that is not what we are doing; we are here, patting ourselves on the back. We should expect little else from a party that has continually aligned itself to the bankrupt "buy now, pay later" fiscal policies of the Labour Government. That is the message that the DUP and the Labour Party have espoused.

The governor of the Bank of England had to intervene recently in order to stop the Prime Minister making further giveaways that we cannot afford in the next Budget. There are concerns that public debt in the United Kingdom will reach £1 trillion. Yet what does the DUP do? It tables a motion that completely ignores

the problem and that will give the people of Northern Ireland a false sense of security.

Make no mistake: recovery from this recession is going to be tough and slow, but the quicker we acknowledge that and get to grips with the scale of the problem, the sooner we will really be able to address it. The Ulster Unionist Party supports low rates and is committed to providing as much support as possible for households. However, we also support sustainable government that can balance its books and deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland in the long term.

The DUP could do much more to help our economy. It could start by making progress on the planning reforms that appear to be delayed and by publishing draft PPS 5, which seems to be locked in the system; that would have an effect on business. A recent article in the 'Belfast Telegraph' highlighted that two thirds of the people want the Government to live within their means. We must reflect the views of those people in our actions.

**Dr McDonnell:** I thank the proposers of the motion. Some have suggested that they may have an ulterior motive, but I take it on face value that they are well intentioned.

The global economic downturn is having an impact on every single household in Northern Ireland, one way or another. It is unfortunate that the financial and corporate greed in the City of London and in New York has brought us all to our knees. Although that reckless, irresponsible and unethical financial behaviour on the part of the finance houses has been rewarded, in some cases with obscene bonuses, thousands of people across Northern Ireland in all our communities, through no fault of their own, are joining ever-lengthening dole queues as each month passes.

I am mystified why household bills only ever go one way, which is upwards. We saw last year, when electricity and gas prices went up, that they did not come back down to previous levels; they are still 30% to 35% higher than they used to be. It is not only electricity and gas prices that are rising but rates; I do not recall rates ever going down. I welcome rates being frozen, but they have never dropped.

Petrol and diesel prices — as people try to travel about — have also gone up, and, again, they are much higher than they were a couple of years ago. Regardless of what happened, the oil companies seem to be making more and more profit. Last, but not least, food prices have gone up and stayed up.

Unfortunately, income — which we usually expect to creep up slowly in parallel with those rises — has not increased in recent times. As other Members have said, for many people income has gone down. People have had their pay cut or are working short time — some companies are putting people on three- or four-day

weeks. For the majority of families in Northern Ireland, paying household bills is very difficult. Trying to pay those bills when one or more of the breadwinners in the household is unemployed is extremely difficult, if not near impossible. That is the reality that hundreds of people face.

Although it is useful for us to ventilate this issue here today — to talk about it and to draw attention to it — people are looking to the Assembly and the Executive for action, and less hot air. The level of the regional rates is perhaps the most straightforward and direct influence that the Executive have over keeping household bills down. The SDLP and I welcome the freeze on regional rates at a time of increasing financial pressure on all the households across the community.

We also welcome the fact that the DUP has seen sense and is following our lead on ensuring that vulnerable householders are targeted for support by keeping them warm through the warm homes scheme, which not only helps keep fuel bills down but creates a degree of employment. Although that scheme in itself is useful, honestly, I would rather see better grants for insulation and heat conservation — which would save the money in the first place — than the stable door being shut with a £150 grant after the horse has bolted and the energy is spent.

Without taxation powers, the Executive are limited in their access to the economic levers of power. That does not mean that they can sit on their hands and do nothing outside setting the regional rate. When the Budget was cobbled together, we said clearly that it failed to meet the needs of the ordinary people of Northern Ireland. Now, in today's vastly changing and unprecedented economic circumstances, the need to revise the Budget and to help households and small businesses has never been more urgent.

Politics aside — I am not trying to score points here — today's circumstances are vastly different from those of two years ago, and our priorities have to change rapidly to meet those changing circumstances. A revision of the Budget would allow the Executive to redirect spending to easily identified areas of greatest need. It would give the Executive the real opportunity to provide targeted and effective assistance to households that are seriously struggling to make ends meet, and to help local businesses that are fighting to survive and avoid laying staff off or, worse still, closing altogether.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Dr McDonnell:** Thank you.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds):** We face a global recession like no other that we have experienced in a generation or more, directly affecting households, businesses and Government. We

are living in challenging times and so there will be greater demands made on the Assembly and Executive to assist the needy, whether they be failing businesses or the householder facing mounting bills or limited income. We need to demonstrate that all of us are focused on that.

Unfortunately, what we heard from some quarters today is petty, party-political point-scoring of the worst kind, which will not be lost on the people who choose to follow this debate and who are concerned about their jobs and incomes. Most Members actually addressed the issue in a sensible way, but unfortunately, as usual, one or two Members who live in a world of their own did not. Those Members live in a fantasy world in which they make their points and then scuttle out, so that they are not here to answer the responses when those come. We will come to that in a minute.

We need to keep our feet on the ground in offering help. No new money is coming our way, so we need to get the balance right between what is reasonable and fair to ask people to pay for rates, while raising sufficient funds to meet our spending requirements.

That is a sensible and balanced approach. The balancing act also extends to individual Departments, which should live within their means and get on with the job of delivering on the agreed Budget and on the agreed Programme for Government.

Therefore, those who stood in the Chamber today and lambasted the Executive and the Department of Finance and Personnel need to realise that Mr Empey, Mr McGimpsey, Ms Ritchie, the Sinn Féin Ministers and the DUP Ministers all agreed to the Programme for Government, the Budget and the statement on 15 December 2008. Unfortunately, Mr McNarry is once again absent when it comes to hearing the rebuttal to his points; any Member who takes part in a debate, no matter what party he or she is in, should have the decency to hang around to hear the response. Otherwise, it is clear that that Member is engaging in party-political stuntery.

The point is that the Ministers from Mr McNarry's party agreed to the Programme for Government and to the Budget. So, if he has an issue with either of those policies, let him first cry to Mr Empey and Mr McGimpsey and decide what their stance is, instead of coming in here and pretending that everyone but himself and his party are to blame.

The debate is about the help that households across Northern Ireland can get in the current global recession. It is important to differentiate between the long-term policies presented in the Programme for Government and the imperative for short-run immediate interventions. There is a need to focus on both. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has looked at the issue and said that there is a need to not recycle the long-term objectives,

but also a need for immediate interventions. If we were not taking those immediate interventions, people would be in here asking what devolution is about.

Freezing the domestic regional rate will provide help for every ratepayer, and I am glad about the welcome that the measure received in the House today. When comparing that policy with the previous position under direct rule, when there were annual increases in the regional rate well above inflation — as high as 19% — the Executive can be proud of what they have done. This year's domestic regional rate has been frozen, and that will be maintained for the next two years. That will save households around £7 million this year. The non-domestic regional rate will also be frozen next year, which will save businesses around £8 million, and reference has been made to the cap on industrial rates.

I take pride in pointing out that local-taxation bills in Northern Ireland are much lower than they are elsewhere in the United Kingdom and that rises in unemployment have not been as high. I am not saying that we should be complacent, but those are the facts. For example, last week in Whitehall, people were boasting that the average council-tax bill for band D — the mid-range band — will be £1,414 from next month, which compares with an average rates bill in Northern Ireland of £736.

The Treasury is well aware of those figures. Some Members are running around asking if I mention the difference in figures to the Treasury, which says a lot about their approach to such matters — they would tug their forelock to our masters at the Treasury. Of course the Treasury is well aware of the figures, but Northern Ireland is a devolved region in which the Assembly and the Executive are able to set their own policies. The Treasury respects that; we have arguments with each other, and I will come on to one of the main arguments that we are having with it. We must not forget that water charges are paid by all households in Great Britain and that the Executive have not gone down that road in Northern Ireland.

A wide range of measures have been introduced that will provide additional help to many hard-pressed households, particularly those on low incomes. Early-payment discount schemes and rates relief for those on lower incomes have been introduced, saving households considerable amounts of money. The rates-relief scheme is targeted at those who are on low incomes and just outside the housing benefit threshold, and it provides assistance to around 20,000 of our most vulnerable households. Together with the housing benefit system, around 200,000 people get help with their rates. In addition, the transitional rates-relief scheme has provided £20 million to households over the past two years.

Since devolution was restored, better and increased targeting of rating relief has been achieved through the lifting of the pensioner savings threshold, which applies to the low-income rates-relief scheme, from £16,000 to £50,000; the introduction of the lone pensioner allowance; and the retention of the early-payment discount. The lone pensioner allowance has been widely welcomed by senior citizens and their representatives.

Reference has also been made to the council package introduced before Christmas, which has also played its part in helping keep district rate increases as low as possible in all 26 district council areas. That has reduced the overall rates bill for every rate-paying household.

5.30 pm

Those are all measures, which are already in place, that will help people in need through this recession. Members will be aware of some of the other measures that have emerged as a result of the review of the rating system and that are due to be introduced shortly. They include giving home-owning pensioners the ability to defer payments of their rates bills, as well as rebates for those who own their own homes and invest in energy efficiency measures.

Households that are dependent on the survival and success of smaller businesses will also be helped, through the small business rates-relief scheme, as well as the freezing of non-domestic rates in the coming year.

We also need to focus — as we are doing — on the take up of rates-relief schemes and rebates, so that hard-pressed families and pensioners receive all their entitlements. That is particularly important in these difficult days. I want to ensure that people are aware of what is due to them, and that the application process is made as easy as possible, and we have already taken steps to address that.

Some Members may pooh-pooh all that: they may say that it is not the right thing to do, and that we should be doing less of this kind of activity. I do not believe that that is right. A balance must be struck, but I believe that it is important that we are shown to be trying to do what is necessary to help people who have been facing very considerable challenges.

In the December monitoring round statement, we announced a number of schemes to assist those most in need. Reference has been made to the £150 fuel poverty payment, which will be made and which will be extended to a further 50,000 low-income households, allowing 150,000 households to benefit.

As usual in a debate such as this, comments have ranged far and wide. The debate crosses a wide range of issues. For instance, the Programme for Government, capital investment and wider Budget issues have been mentioned, which do not necessarily relate to the

debate on household bills. Again, I hear this nonsense about there being a black hole in the Budget. Mr McNarry and others have referred to a black hole in the Budget and are telling us that there is a black hole in this year's Budget. We are about to end the financial year, and there will not be a black hole in the Budget, just as there will not be any black hole in the Budget in future years.

Members have suggested that some kind of hole has been blown in our plans on net capital investment. Net capital investment will be around one third higher this year than it was in 2007-08. Comparing that with other areas — as some Members have suggested — it is a considerable level of net investment in the economy of Northern Ireland.

As regards capital receipts, nobody in their right mind is going to sell off property — not least the Government. Along with every Member of the House, I would be asking questions if Departments were flogging off assets at this moment, during a downturn in the property cycle, rather than holding on to them until it becomes more sensible and profitable to sell them off in the future. Of course, the assets are being retained for that purpose: however, the net investment in the capital infrastructure of Northern Ireland is £1.5 billion this year — £1.6 billion gross — and we could have done more had capital assets been realised. However, they could not be realised because of the points that I have made. They can still be realised and are, therefore, available for future investment.

There is no question of there being any significant issue as far as the capital investment programme is concerned. Members have mentioned the money that has been lost from the sale of the Crossnacreevy plant-testing station. Of course, that is an issue as far as the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is concerned, but there will be projects coming up in 2009-2010 and 2010-11 that will not proceed, which will make up for that money not being realised through Crossnacreevy.

These are the sensible ways of approaching the situation, and we know that these things will happen because they have already been indicated — for instance, by the Department of the Environment in relation to water infrastructure issues. If Members were to take the time to look, listen and learn, they might not be coming out with some of the nonsense that they have done.

Concerns have also been expressed about the implications of the £5 billion savings — the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel raised that issue — that the Treasury is seeking from all UK Departments in 2010-11. The exact implications will only become known when the Budget is announced, and we will be watching that carefully.

However, to have the audacity of Mr McNarry and Mr Beggs to come in here and lecture the Assembly about the finances of Northern Ireland, when they are part and parcel of a party that is proposing severe and swingeing capital expenditure cuts in Northern Ireland of well over £100 million, which they would implement from April — from Wednesday onwards — if they had their way. How they can stand here and lecture everyone else about the finances of Northern Ireland, when they are involved with a party — of which, we heard today, their current party leader might have been treasurer if things had gone according to plan — which would actually propose such cuts.

I hope that the Ulster Unionists stick to that policy, if that is what they really believe in, and that they will be going through the Lobbies in support of it in the Assembly, and that they will stand by those sorts of policy commitments. We oppose the imposition of such cuts as part of the settlement for Northern Ireland, whether from a Labour Government or a Conservative Government. Unfortunately, that is not where the Ulster Unionists stand. They might have stood there once, but they stand there no longer.

With regard to the issues that were raised about the financial package: of course, the financial package was an issue that no one ever raised when devolution was agreed in 1998. There was no demand by the Ulster Unionists or anyone else for any kind of financial package, at any point. They ignored it, there was silence, they never asked for anything. Of course, what we have achieved in that respect has been considerable. Not least, the Ulster Unionists choose to ignore the fact that only a few months ago we managed to get £800 million to ensure that the Treasury would not be levying non-cash costs on the Northern Ireland Executive — money that would have to be found as a result of the deferral of water charges.

At no time do I expect any of the Members who raise those issues to take those matters on board. I do not know whether that is a question of financial literacy or just a pure decision not to take those matters on board, but either way they need to face up to reality. The Ulster Unionists, of course, is a party that came up with a crackpot idea just before Christmas about how to deal with the financial situation of Northern Ireland.

The party's spokesman, Mr McNarry, came up with the crackpot idea that what they should do is go to the Treasury with a list of all the Government assets in Northern Ireland, borrow all the money against them — which is, of course, totally at odds with Treasury policy; if he knew anything at all about Treasury policy, he would know that the idea was nonsense — then we take all that money, wait a few years, then sell off all the assets at a higher price, give the Treasury back its money, and pocket the rest.

That was the crackpot idea from a crackpot politician about the finances of Northern Ireland. Yet, he talks about the DUP, about the Executive — in which two of his Members are Ministers — and about financial responsibility. That is the standard of financial responsibility from the Ulster Unionist Party, which is now allied with the Tories in seeking to cut the budget of Northern Ireland. That is the reality to which the Ulster Unionists have to face up, and no amount of windbagery, bluster and fantasy-world economics or politics will divorce them from the fact that they have been exposed on those issues.

They now have to answer, in the real world of grown-up politics, how they can ally themselves with a party that is now going to propose severe and stringent cuts to the public expenditure position of Northern Ireland. That means cuts to health, education, schools, housing, environment and all the rest of it — let them answer.

**Mr Ford:** I hope that the final challenge from the Minister was not directed at this corner of the House. Anyway, we will let others answer for themselves at a different time.

As Stephen Farry said when he proposed the amendment, the Alliance Party had some concerns about the original motion: it is just a tad self-congratulatory; not, of course, that anyone else in the House has ever engaged in such a thing. We believe that the motion has been improved significantly by the proposer's willingness to accept the amendment, which at least emphasises the fact that it is not simply a matter of saying that untargeted benefits to everyone is of most help in a time of recession, but to recognise the need to target measures at households on low income. That is, clearly, where we now stand, and that has been the bulk of the contributions from different corners of the House; except, of course, from the two unionist parties, which seem to spend most of their time attacking each other.

As Stephen Farry did not quite say, I believe that we are all now at least neo-Keynesians. On behalf of the Keynesians in this corner, we welcome the conversion of some Members, although, sadly, not yet the entire House.

I will not go over the whole issue of the capital budget. The Minister referred to the lack of money that we currently face because there is no point in selling assets whose value has diminished. However, the case could be made that spending on infrastructure is the best way of dealing with the recession; it would create long-term benefits and provide incomes for people who are out of work, particularly in the construction industry.

Although I welcome the reduction in the rates burden in a region of low income, I recognise that it has implications for when the Treasury imposes the so-called efficiency savings. Mitchel McLaughlin highlighted that point when referring to the Barnett

formula and efficiency savings. My problem is that I see little benefit in suggesting the sacking of a few front line workers, such as classroom assistants or nurses, describing the money saved as “efficiency” and giving a bonus to the relevant permanent secretary. In no way is that a justifiable use of public expenditure, but we seem to be facing that.

Mr McNarry, in his elegant and erudite contribution, suggested that the motion is a silly stunt that is unworthy of the House. Most of private Members’ business appears to constitute stunts, and I have seen many that are worse than this one. Through contributions from elsewhere in the House, the Assembly has at least had a serious discussion on economic policy, albeit tangential to the original motion. That has been good for all of us. Immediately after Mr McNarry, Declan O’Loan, for example, engaged more positively with concerns about unemployment. He highlighted issues on which greater expenditure and investment are necessary, which is the kind of thing that we should be looking at.

Sadly, Mr McQuillan and Mr Shannon merely played the role of sucking up to the Minister. However, they do it so well that they deserve a mention.

Claire McGill talked about the opportunity for end-year funding and looking at an anti-poverty strategy monitoring. There is serious engagement, therefore, elsewhere in the House on this issue. The Assembly will not solve the capital budget problems in one afternoon, and there are wider public expenditure issues. However, having referred to our all being at least neo-Keynesians, I was pleased that the Tories on my left — geographically — have proved that they are not yet Keynesians, even if the rest of us have got there. The Minister, therefore, still has an education role in getting those points across.

Alasdair McDonnell made some points that should be noted. He rightly made the point that household bills tend to go up but never down. He also said that people look to the Assembly for action, not hot air. If the debate has been solely about the words of the motion, or even the amendment, I fear that it has been simply hot air. However, if the debate is a measure of how Members are starting to look, in detail, at the proposals being made from around the House, and if every Minister and Department demonstrates a similar level of engagement, we will have more to go on.

The Minister talked about the need to balance expenditure, and I believe that he is right. The Alliance Party does not consider the Minister’s balance of expenditure to be quite right. However, the discussion must continue. The Assembly should have had a proper Budget process this year, but in-year monitoring at least ensures that we can continue to seek to achieve the correct balance. The concern of the Alliance Party, which we put into the amendment, is that generalised

benefits would replace benefits targeted at those who are most in need. That came through in much of what the Minister said.

The debate has usefully covered many issues, and the motion, as amended, will be a positive statement calling on Ministers to move forward.

**Mr Weir:** At the risk of being accused of sucking up to the Minister, I will try to summarise the valuable debate. As Jim Shannon pointed out, the financial pressures on households are at the top of the agenda, and that applies even to “ordinary households”, as Claire McGill described them. Those pressures are at the heart of the debate.

In case there is any lack of clarity, the DUP is happy to support the Alliance Party amendment, possibly despite, rather than because of, Mr Farry’s speech. Nevertheless, as I point out to Stephen, a win is a win.

Simon Hamilton proposed the motion and highlighted the ongoing economic context and the position that the Assembly inherited. Our approach to rates contrasts strongly with that taken in the years before the Assembly was re-established in 2007, during which there was an increase of 85% in the regional rate.

We were faced with a situation whereby industrial rates were bit by bit heading towards 100%, but we put a freeze on that, and we have been able to hold them at their current level. Mr Hamilton highlighted a range of issues with regard to district council rates relief, rates-relief savings, and the lone pensioner allowance. In the spirit of the amendment, 17,000 pensioners have benefited from that allowance, and, in my constituency, about 1,500 pensioners have benefited. That is not to be sneezed at.

5.45 pm

We got mixed messages from the Member who moved the amendment, but we sometimes get those messages from the Alliance Party on the issue. Dr Farry rightly spoke of the logic in protecting household income and said that it was sensible in avoiding raising taxes. Yet, at one stage, it was slightly unclear whether he actually supported the freeze in the regional rate. Indeed, he somewhat begrudgingly said that he felt that the Executive might have stumbled across doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. However, I will correct him on one small point. The fuel payments that people are receiving were not described as winter fuel payments. They were actually — *[Interruption.]*

At the end of the day, people will benefit, and we all welcome that.

Mitchel McLaughlin made the valid point that every Minister must make a contribution, and he put it in the wider context of the broader economic sphere. Against that, as well as the point that the Ulster Unionists missed, he highlighted the pressures that may come from the

Labour Government. However, the Minister made the point that if the Conservatives were in Government, drastic and swingeing cuts would be put in place.

I do not know whether Mr McNarry could be described as the Patrick Moore of the Northern Ireland Assembly — constantly gazing trying to find black holes — or as the Scarlet Pimpernel, because he delivered his speech and then disappeared. He gave us an analysis that was about as dodgy as an expense return from the Home Secretary, and he accused us of stuntery. It would perhaps be wrong to draw too many conclusions from that, but the words “pot” and “kettle” come to mind when referring to Mr McNarry.

A number of Members highlighted the £1 billion package. That package was delivered through the deferment of water charges, the renegotiation of the reinvestment and reform initiative, and by digging ourselves out of the mess that the previous Administration left. The Member made a valid point, as did Mr O’Loan, when they said that where we can protect jobs, we should do so. However, we must realise that there is a limitation on that, as state aid rules will limit what we can do.

Mr O’Loan made a fairly positive contribution, but, not surprisingly, he mentioned the old chestnut of the housing sector being top of the agenda. One would be disappointed if he did not mention the Housing Executive.

**Mr Hamilton:** It took him three minutes and 20 seconds to mention it.

**Mr Weir:** That was quite surprising. Our focus needs to be on action. Indeed, among the range of issues that I have mentioned, the delivery of money to households that are on low incomes, as well as the help that is forthcoming for small businesses, is real, positive action.

Mr McQuillan highlighted a number of measures that are in place to help the elderly. Claire McGill, not surprisingly perhaps, referred to Strabane and Omagh. As with the SDLP on housing issues, that is a familiar theme. However, she highlighted the important need to keep pressure on household bills to a minimum, and she said that there is a need to help “ordinary households”, as she put it. That is what we believe we are doing, and that is why we support the amendment.

Addressing fuel poverty through the warm homes scheme, as well as the additional money that is being decided on by the Executive, will provide a solid basis. However, we need to ensure that we keep it under review to make sure that it is moving forward.

Jim Shannon, while discussing the concern of rural households, highlighted the positive steps that have been taken. We have more support for construction projects than we have had at any time in the history of Northern Ireland.

He highlighted a range of issues such as water charges, and the money that has been secured in that respect. Those factors would be under threat if our friends in UCUNF (Ulster Conservative and Unionist — New Force) or NICUP (Northern Ireland Conservative and Unionist Party) — or whatever else they want to call themselves nowadays — got into power.

Then we had the contribution of Mr Beggs, whose spirit of statesmanship and oratory was reminiscent of Churchill. Unfortunately, it was not Churchill of the Second World War, but the dog from the TV adverts —

**A Member:** Oh yes.

**Mr Weir:** Oh yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Beggs voiced his concern that the DUP was boasting about low rates and taxes, and was deeply concerned about the House of Lords Committee. I would be very surprised if Mr Beggs did not place his full trust in one member of that House of Lords Committee — Lord Trimble — to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland, but then again —

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** No. The Member did not give way on a number of occasions when he was asked to. Therefore, I do not see why I should extend that courtesy to him.

Mr Beggs clearly does not have a great deal of faith in Mr Trimble. Perhaps that is the one point on which he is correct. Mr Beggs also castigated the Executive, saying that the Programme for Government was becoming less meaningful by the day. However, I participated in a TV programme with his party leader some months ago, and when asked if the Programme for Government should be renegotiated or recasted, he said that it should not. He said that it was as sound as when it was drawn up, and that the basics remained the same.

Alasdair McDonnell, in a very worthy contribution, highlighted the universal nature of the problems facing us. He highlighted the inflationary, and sometimes above inflationary, effects on electricity, gas, petrol and food prices. He indicated — and I would agree that it is undoubtedly the case — that there is a limitation on what the Executive can do. That is because many factors are international in nature, and are therefore outside of our control. Furthermore, he highlighted that one of the levers at our hand is the regional rate, and the DUP and the Executive have worked hard to keep that regional rate at a frozen level. He also highlighted the valuable contribution of the warm homes scheme and winter fuel payments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel rightly talked about getting the balance right. He spoke of the expansion of the rates-relief scheme, and of the important message that we need to send to our constituents that rates relief is not always taken up. He also spoke of fuel payments, intervention in the early payment of rates and

some movement in small-businesses rates relief, which will be of use in protecting our indigenous businesses.

The Minister also spoke of the need to avoid imprudent use of assets, which those like Mr McNarry, who is keen to sell off the assets at every available opportunity, should perhaps take heed of. Indeed, at times, Mr McNarry displays a degree of economic illiteracy that is really quite frightening.

I am not quite willing to be labelled as holding to Keynesian economics —

**Dr Farry:** Neo —

**Mr Weir:** Or neo-Keynesian. I just wonder how “neo” Dr Farry is being when he refers to it in such terms.

As Mr Ford highlighted, it is important that efficiency savings are not used as code for sacking people who provide front line services. Indeed, if that is the case, it would be a sign of mismanagement in Departments. Efficiencies should genuinely mean efficiencies.

I welcome the debate, and I urge Members to support both the motion and the amendment.

*Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes the difficult economic conditions as a result of the global economic downturn; notes the impact on household bills; notes the increase in the regional rate during the period of devolution between 1999 and 2002, and again under direct rule between 2002 and 2007; notes the freeze in the domestic regional rate; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that every possible step is taken to reduce pressure on the bills of householders in particular through targeting measures at those householders on low incomes.

*Adjourned at 5.54 pm*



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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 31 March 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### North/South Ministerial Council Environment Sectoral Format

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in environment sectoral format.

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I will make a statement on the eighth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in environment sectoral format that was held on 20 March at Farmleigh House in Dublin. The report has been agreed with Minister Ritchie, who was also in attendance.

The Irish Government were represented by John Gormley TD, Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, who chaired the meeting, and I, as Environment Minister, with Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, represented the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Council received a report on the progress that has been made to date on the ongoing discussions between the Department of the Environment, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the relevant competent authorities that are aimed at effecting the repatriation of illegally dumped cross-border waste.

The Ministers noted that Dublin City Council became the sole Irish competent authority designated for trans-frontier shipments of waste in July 2007, and it is committed to letting a contract for the removal of waste at Slattingh and Trillick and its disposal in a suitable facility in Ireland. They also noted that a draft framework agreement that covers key issues surrounding the scope of the work, the methodology to be employed and the apportionment of costs has been developed and, it is hoped, will be agreed in the near future.

The Council welcomed the joint concerted enforcement actions that are continuing to target shipments of waste and noted that future action is planned. The Council also received a presentation from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on current work and the potential for co-operation on environmental research and state-of-environment reporting with the aim of providing positive outcomes for the environment and the economy.

The Ministers noted that the EPA and NIEA will bring forward proposals at the next NSMC meeting in the environment sectoral format for continued co-operation in this area.

Those will involve the development and publication of a common set of environment indicators, enhanced co-operation and further work in relation to environmental research and on environmental technologies, as well as co-operation to ensure that, building on the experience of the jointly developed North/South website for environmental research (known as the 'aNSwer' website), information on environmental projects across the island of Ireland is made available.

The Council welcomed the continuing progress on the implementation of the EU water framework directive for shared waters, and, in particular, the achievement of another important deadline with the publication of the draft river basin management plans for three cross-border international river basin districts: the North Western, the Neagh Bann and the Shannon.

The Council noted that the publication of the draft plans for a six-month public consultation period is a significant step towards the development and publication by December 2009 of the final river basin management plans, which will help to protect and improve the water environment in cross-border international river basin districts and throughout both jurisdictions. Ministers welcomed the opportunity for the public in both jurisdictions to contribute to the river basin planning process through responding to the consultation on the draft river basin management plans.

The Council also noted the carrying out of a jointly funded strategic environment assessment in parallel with the management plans to evaluate the environmental consequences of the plans and the programme of measures, and to consult with the public in that regard.

The Council noted the importance of the development of markets for recycled materials, and, in particular, the strategic documents 'Towards Resource Management: The Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy 2006-2020' and, in Ireland, the 'Market Development Programme for Waste Resources 2007-2011'.

Ministers welcomed the reconstituted North/South market development steering group, which includes representatives from the business and non-governmental

sectors and was established to drive forward a market development programme for recyclable material. The terms of reference of the group, which will be reviewed on an annual basis, currently includes the following priority waste streams: organics; food waste; domestic waste plastics; construction and demolition waste.

The Council also noted the North/South market development steering group's intention to consider developments in the proposal for an all-island paper mill, and Ministers agreed to consider that issue at the next NSMC meeting in the environment sectoral format. The Council agreed to meet again in that sector in September or October 2009.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement on the North/South Ministerial Council environment sectoral meeting. On behalf of the Environment Committee, I welcome the arrangements announced by the Minister for increased co-ordination and co-operation for the benefit of the environment on the entire island.

In his statement, the Minister referred to:

“joint concerted enforcement actions that are continuing to target shipments of waste”.

In April 2008, in response to a question about illegal dumping, the Environment Committee was told by the Department that the illegal depositing of waste in the North was extremely profitable to those involved due to the costs of legal disposal, and that the disparity in the cost of disposal of waste to landfill in each jurisdiction was acting as an economic driver and was encouraging the illegal transport of waste from the Republic into the North.

Can the Minister tell us, therefore, what concerted enforcement actions have been taking place to address the illegal transport of waste into the North, what his Department has done to reduce the economic drivers that might be exacerbating that, and what measures he is taking, as Minister, to prevent any increased pressure that the global economic downturn might have on that illegal activity?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I thank the Chairperson of the Environment Committee for his questions. I, too, recognise the importance of co-ordination, because, of course, when it comes to river pollution or other forms of pollution, the border does not act as a barrier to its movement.

Therefore, I see that there are good grounds for co-operation with the authorities in the Republic. As the Member well knows, lack of co-ordination in the past may have led to some of the problems to which he referred in his second question.

I will say two things in reply; first, about practical joint action and, secondly, about what we are doing to make that activity less profitable. There have already been a number of joint ventures between the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the Irish Republic's Environmental Protection Agency. In fact, the last joint action was taken in January and February this year, when the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's trans-frontier shipment of waste team conducted joint inspections with Dublin City Council on both sides of the border. That action and those inspections are intelligence-led. It is important that the authorities on both sides of the border are aware of the likely movements of waste, especially those that will be undertaken by people with a record of illegal activity. It is important that there is not only a sharing of intelligence but co-operation and co-ordination of enforcement action on both sides of the border.

Since 2007, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has conducted five verification inspections of notifiable and green-list waste movements, and four joint road and port inspections with Dublin City Council. Further joint inspections are planned. I want to see more of that activity taking place, and we will be pushing for more to be done.

The enforcement section in Northern Ireland has the job of ensuring that dumping illegal waste does not pay. There is evidence of where we have gone after people hard once we have identified that they have allowed illegal waste to be deposited on their land. So far, there have been 33 convictions, with five prison sentences handed out that have ranged from two to 12 months. I want to see more convictions. There have been 87 enforcement files involving incidents of waste from the Irish Republic. We are preparing the files; we are taking people to court; we are securing convictions and — in addition — we are seizing assets. So far, around £800,000 of assets have been seized. Some of those cases are subject to appeal in the court. Nevertheless, the Chairperson has made an important point: we must ensure that we do not allow people to benefit from dumping illegal waste. They may think twice about doing so if they know that they will be caught and punished severely.

**Mr Weir:** The Minister referred to environmental research and to a degree of work and co-operation with the Irish Republic. Will he expand on the discussions that were held on the benefits of joint research, and will he outline the benefits of joint working between the Environment Protection Agency and its Irish equivalent on the environmental indicators?

**The Minister of the Environment:** At the meeting, there was a presentation from representatives from Northern Ireland and the Environmental Protection Agency in the Republic outlining the research to date and the work that they intend to do. That joint

presentation was well received by officials and Ministers. It illustrated how each report uses similar indicators, and provided an overview of the continuing work to develop a single comparable set of all-island environmental indicators.

10.45 am

The possible benefits of that include having common international research linkages. Funds could be drawn down for that because EU research funds would be levered. Such a single set of indicators would also ensure that there is a value-for-money approach to research projects. Whenever we spend money on projects, the co-operation that is involved means that we should achieve maximum value from that money. Therefore, additional funding will be brought down because it will be easier to lever EU funding, and greater value for money should be ensured.

At the next meeting, we will consider proposals on the way forward. At that stage, we will perhaps be able to flesh out some of the benefits that have been realised.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He will know that I raised the issue of illegal dumping previously in the Chamber. What is the time frame for the repatriation of the identified sites? Have any new sites been identified? In the past 12 months or so, local councils — including mine — and the Forest Service have had to pay for the removal of waste. Was there any discussion about reimbursing the councils for the resources that they have had to use to remove that waste? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of the Environment:** As far as I know, about 20 sites have been identified so far. I want to see the process moving quickly, because some of those sites are already leaking leachate into water courses and are causing severe pollution. It is important that we move quickly so that we can deal with that situation.

The two sites that I mentioned in the statement are the first two to have been identified. I think that we are now close to reaching agreement with the competent authority in the Republic, which is Dublin City Council. Once that agreement has been signed, the procurement process will begin. Under the EU rules that apply to the size of the contract, that process must last for about four or five months. After that, work will start to remove the waste and to dispose of it in the Republic. Remediation work will then be done on the two sites, after which we will work through the rest of the sites.

I cannot honestly give the Member a timescale for the remediation work and for the removal of waste from all the other sites. However, I told Minister Gormley that once the process starts and we have identified the waste in the sites, I want to see the process moving as quickly as possible.

The apportionment of the cost of reimbursements for the removal of waste from now on will be part of the agreement that is finally settled. However, I make it quite clear that since the waste came from the Republic and was dumped illegally in Northern Ireland, a substantial proportion of the costs should be borne by the authority that was responsible for dealing with the waste in the Republic.

**Mr Beggs:** In his statement, the Minister indicated that the EPA and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency will bring forward proposals to the next North/South Ministerial Council in environment sectoral format. He stated that part of that work will involve the development and publication of a common set of environmental indicators.

Does the Minister agree that it is important that those indicators remain consistent with those that are used throughout the rest of the United Kingdom so that we are able to compare environmental standards in Northern Ireland with those in the rest of the United Kingdom?

**The Minister of the Environment:** Whenever we assess the state of the environment in different jurisdictions, we want to have comparable data. An awful lot of EU framework directives require common assessments in countries throughout Europe. Therefore, the more consistent that we can make those indicators so that one country can be compared with another, the better. That is important even from an EU point of view.

**Mr Ford:** I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. First, I noticed that when he was talking about the river basin management plans the Minister mentioned carrying out a strategic environmental assessment. Will he give us details of the timing of that assessment; who will carry it out; and what sort of public consultation there will be?

Secondly, it is clear that the North/South Market Development Steering Group, which develops markets for recyclables, is good and necessary. However, the Minister expressed concerns about exporting valuable recyclable materials to the Far East at an energy and financial cost. Given that, and in the light of the co-operation required both North and South, and with the private sector, will he give us any firm indication of actual developments as opposed to aspirations?

**The Minister of the Environment:** We had been working towards the development of an all-Ireland paper mill. However, as is the case with all such initiatives, unless they are market-driven and a good strong business case can be made for them, they will not work in the long run. There is no point in setting up something that is not sustainable or profitable. However, there is renewed interest in the proposal, and

it will be a case of whether business interests decide there is a market for it in the whole of the island.

No other specific projects have been mentioned to date. However, given the downturn in world prices, it is important that we look at what can be done within the curtilage of our own two countries to try and ensure that we recycle as much as possible, and recycle it here. If one looks at how waste prices for recycled material have held up in Northern Ireland, one can see that we have good long-term contracts anyhow and that most of those are with businesses that are using waste in a proper and profitable way. We are fairly well placed in that regard. I do not want to give the impression that most of the waste that we recycle is sent around the world, when, in fact, local contracts are already in place. It essentially reflects my economic philosophy that unless things can be done on the basis of business and profitability, many people will call into question the sustainability of some of the recycling targets.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency is carrying out the strategic environment assessment of water management at the moment.

**Mr Ross:** I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the steps that his Department has taken to combat illegal dumping. My question is on water-quality management. Will the Minister give us details on what further North/South co-operation there will be on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive?

**The Minister of the Environment:** First, as I said in my statement, public consultation on the draft river basin management plans is ongoing in Northern Ireland and the Republic and will continue until June.

Secondly, we are holding water information days and events to engage with interested parties, and those events are being held in both jurisdictions. Officials have been co-ordinating arrangements where possible, because, in places in which there is joint interest in a river basin, it will be easier for people to give their views to either the Northern Ireland Environment Agency or the Environmental Protection Agency in the South. Reciprocal invitations have been extended to people in both jurisdictions.

Co-ordination is ongoing at policy and technical level between officials in both jurisdictions. The main reason for that is to facilitate the preparation of the final plans. We aim to have the final river basin management plans published in both jurisdictions on 22 December, so a Christmas present will be available for those who are interested in that.

**Mr Doherty:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and, particularly, paragraph 4's reference to the removal of material from Trillick, which is part of my

constituency. I have been working on that issue for some months, and I am delighted that it has reached this stage. The Minister's written statement refers to "the apportionment of costs", but he used the word "enforcement" in his verbal statement. I would like him to elaborate on that. I agree with the Minister that the vast proportion of costs should lie with the South, because that is where the waste has come from.

In addition, paragraph 13 of the written statement — and the Minister may, to some extent, have answered this question — refers to an all-island paper mill. Would that mill be about recycling, or about afforestation, the cutting of trees and feeding into the production of brand new paper, or a combination of both? On a slightly lighter note, in the House last week, the Minister talked about the skies having been blue when he was in Dublin. I had not realised that it was 20 March when he was in Dublin. I happened to be in London on 20 March and the skies were blue there, too. So, just to put his mind at ease: partition has nothing to do with the colour of the sky. *[Laughter.]*

**The Minister of the Environment:** I am also well informed that the skies were blue in Belfast on that day, too, so there was a certain amount of commonality across all the islands on that day. However, I must say that it was a beautiful morning in Dublin, and I had the opportunity to act in a very environmentally friendly way and walk to the meeting — and it was a very pleasant walk.

**A Member:** Did the Minister walk from Belfast?

**The Minister of the Environment:** No; I did not walk from Belfast. *[Laughter.]*

With regard to the Member's questions: as far as recycling is concerned, I am not quite up to date on all the technology of paper mills, but it is my understanding that any proposed paper mill would be built, primarily, to use recycled materials. That was the whole point of the facility, and to give us some of the economies of scale that are required to deal with the waste paper that is generated in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. I suspect, though, that some virgin material would have to be put into a paper mill to make it work, but, as I said, I could be totally wrong about that because I do not know the technology behind it.

My use of the word "enforcement" referred to having proper enforcement regimes in place to ensure that the problem was not repeated. Of course, the apportionment of costs will not be a case of enforcing, it will be a case of an agreement that is reached between me and the Environment Minister in the Republic or — more properly speaking — with Dublin City Council, the competent authority. Those costs, and the apportionment of those costs, will be in the final agreement.

I made it very clear to the Minister that the issue has dragged on for too long. It is causing a problem. Increasingly, as those sites get older, the pollution problems caused by them will increase. To be fair to the Minister, he, too, wants a quick resolution. There was a meeting of minds on the issue, and I hope that the work will start sooner rather than later, and that the agreement will be signed in the next few weeks.

11.00 pm

**Mr I McCrea:** I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. He referred to, as Mr Ford noted earlier, the reconstitution of the North/South market development steering group. Does the Minister consider that the reconstituted body will produce any benefits for the people of Northern Ireland?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The whole idea of the North/South market development steering group is to involve people from business and non-governmental sectors in finding a way to drive forward the management and recycling of waste across the island. It will look at matters such as organics, food waste, domestic waste, plastics, construction and demolition waste. Any progress that can be made in helping us to meet our targets for recycling in those areas is important. We have stringent targets to meet by 2020, and any contribution, whether made by our agencies or by the steering group, will be beneficial to both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

**Mr Cree:** I also thank the Minister for his timely statement. My question is similar to that posed by Mr Doherty; it refers to the transport to Northern Ireland of cross-frontier shipments of waste. That waste creates leachate and the Minister has said that he is concerned that the matter be resolved sooner rather than later. Is it likely to be resolved before the next meeting of the group, which will be at the end of this year, or can it be done sooner?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I hope that the agreement will be signed within the next few weeks. For the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, we had a road map as to how the problem should be addressed. I emphasise that it should not only address the legacy of waste that is deposited in Northern Ireland sites; it is more important to avoid it happening again. As other Members have pointed out, there are economic benefits for those who wish to engage in that trade, not least for those in the Irish Republic for whom it presents an opportunity to avoid the heavy landfill tax, and for those in Northern Ireland who take waste onto their land and probably get huge cash payments in return.

The road map considers what the issues are with illegal waste; what needs to be done in respect of it; how we will ascertain whether there is waste on particular sites; what we should do about it; the joint

operations to which I referred earlier; and how, in future, we can avoid this situation.

The draft agreement is with my officials, who are checking that it reflects what was agreed in the road map. If the two Ministers can sign it within the next few weeks, there is then a four- to five-month procurement process to be undergone. That is unavoidable — it is an EU requirement because of the size of the contract. Once that contract is signed, the work should begin. I am not saying that the work will have started by September 2009, or by the time of the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting. However, I hope that all the requirements will be in place to allow it to start.

**Mr Gallagher:** I welcome the Minister's wide-ranging statement. The most striking aspect of this report is the growth in the range of issues that are now discussed at North/South Ministerial Council meetings and that include the environment. That being the case, the Assembly will have to look seriously at having the issue of the environment addressed by a new North/South body.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Please ask a question, Mr Gallagher.

**Mr Gallagher:** I want to ask the Minister about the illegal waste at Garrison and Trillick, particularly at Garrison, as it is close to Lough Melvin, one of the best fishing lakes in these islands and which has, and has for centuries, made a very important contribution to the local economy. On 21 November, I received an answer from the Minister in which he said pretty much what has been repeated here today. He said that the remaining issues could be resolved before the end of the year and that the contract procurement could be allowed to proceed.

I understand the Minister's difficulties; however, we are not any further forward. When this matter comes up again at the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting, will representatives from Dublin City Council be present so that there can be some sort of face-to-face encounter? In Fermanagh and Tyrone, the feeling is that sites in the west are not a priority. Will the Minister give his views on that?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, order. That was a very creative use of your time, Mr Gallagher.

**The Minister of the Environment:** If it takes me as long to get agreement as it took the Member to get his question out, I think that we will still be talking about it this time next year.

I reject the Member's point that there has been no progress since November. We now have a road map and a draft agreement. Perhaps the Member would have preferred that we had not gone down the normal route. It is a mandated issue and it had to be dealt with at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. The

matter was dealt with at the first North/South Ministerial Council meeting since I became responsible for the environment. We are now in the process of checking the details of that and signing off on it.

I have given the Member a timetable, and the road map includes the details of the agreement. Minister Gormley and I have agreed that that is a way forward. It is now the case, of course, that it has to be written down in the form of a contract. I have told the Member that it will be signed off in the next few weeks. I have told him what the procurement process is going to be and how long it is going to take. I do not know what else the Member wishes for.

As far as I am concerned, the issue was raised with me when I became Minister, and I made it clear that I wanted it dealt with as quickly as possible. The fact is that we now have ministerial agreement on it, which we did not have in November; we have the details of that, which we did not have in November; we are on the point of signing off on that, which we were not in November; we know what has to be contained in that, which we did not in November, including the identification, removal and disposal of illegal waste, the making good of the site and the apportionment of costs.

I cannot understand how the Member came to the conclusion that he has. Then again, I do not always understand his thought processes; for example, he still thinks that the sun moves around the earth.

**Mr Spratt:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Illegal waste is often associated with fuel laundering and smuggling — and I am thinking about the lorry load of fuel that went on fire between Lisburn and Carryduff. Has the Minister had any co-operation with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in relation to the fight against illegal fuel launderers and the smuggling of illegal fuel?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Member is quite right: fuel laundering is polluting in nature because the chemicals used to remove the dye are usually dumped in water courses. As that is a clandestine activity, it is very hard to identify the full extent of the environmental damage that that residue might cause.

I am not avoiding the issue of co-operation with the Republic, but HM Revenue and Customs deals with fuel laundering. It tackles and prevents illegal fuel laundering and smuggling. It is not appropriate for me to comment on the level of co-operation, because the Department is not involved in that.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Like Mr Doherty, I have concerns about the illegal waste in Trillick, and I commend the Minister on the ongoing work on that matter. What work has been done by the Department of the Environment to encourage community-recycling networking?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Department recognises that recycling must be dealt with at local level. We must ensure that local people are signed up to community recycling. Networking with communities is done through the waste and resources action programme (WRAP), which the Department funds to the tune of around £1 million a year. Its job is to work closely with businesses and to encourage them to undertake initiatives to deliver increases in recycling, such as using recycled materials in construction and manufacturing. That, of course, reduces the amount of waste that goes to landfill.

**Mr O'Loan:** I thank the Minister for his useful statement. I notice that it is marked as "Restricted", and I wondered whether the DUP Whip was exerting discipline on the Minister's statements.

Earlier, questions were asked on the markets for recycled materials. I hear the public expressing quite a bit of concern that because of the economic downturn, some of the existing markets for recycled materials have disappeared. Will the Minister give an assurance that when householders recycle materials, those are genuinely going into recycling?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The market for recyclables is similar to any market, but it is more prone to the ups and downs of the economic cycle. People who are involved in recycling will know that in the 1990s, it hit a low patch. As I said in answer to earlier questions, Northern Ireland is much better placed in the use of recycled materials, because we entered into long-term contracts and although we are not immune to the ups and downs of the market, we are less prone to that. We have a market for the materials that we collect.

It is not clear when the markets will function normally again, but we believe that the low prices are a temporary phenomena. Therefore, we have allowed the storing of recycled materials. Normally, restrictions are placed on that, but we have recognised that rather than having recycling materials used in a way that they should not be, some storage should be allowed.

I was concerned about some of the stories that appeared in the papers about that, because I want to encourage people to continue to recycle materials as much as possible.

In a statement on 12 January 2009, I made it clear that materials that are collected for recycling in Northern Ireland do not go to landfill, but are used for the purpose for which they are intended.

11.15 am

**My Deputy Speaker:** That concludes questions to the Minister of the Environment on his statement.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### **Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009**

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

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

These regulations are made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979 and increase by 5% the compensation that is payable under the Order to people who satisfy the conditions of entitlement on or after 1 April 2009. The increase in the amount that is payable under the Order maintains parity with the corresponding scheme that operates in Britain and is in line with annual uprating of social security benefits.

I will explain briefly the Order's purpose. An employer can be sued by someone who suffers from an industrial disease when that disease was contracted as a result of working for that employer. However, the diseases that are covered by the Order can take a long time to develop and may not be diagnosed for 20, 40 or even more years after exposure to dust. By that time, the employer or employers who are responsible may no longer exist. Consequently, sufferers and their dependants can experience great difficulty in obtaining compensation.

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

In order to receive a payment under the 1979 scheme, a person must have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit. Two further conditions must be met before any payment can be made. First, there must be no relevant employer who can be sued. Secondly, court action must not have been brought or compensation received in respect of any of the diseases for which a person is claiming.

The scheme covers five respiratory diseases, most of which are directly related to asbestos exposure. They are diffuse mesothelioma; diffuse pleural thickening; primary carcinoma of the lung; byssinosis; and pneumoconiosis, which includes asbestosis.

Some people who suffer from mesothelioma are not entitled to any payment under the 1979 scheme because they were not exposed to asbestos in the workplace. However, since October 2008, the new mesothelioma scheme provides for lump-sum payments to sufferers of the disease, regardless of whether they were employees, self-employed or, indeed, had never worked, provided that they have not already received compensation from another source.

The amount to be paid under the regulations is based on a simple calculation, which cross-references the sufferer's age and level of disability. Higher amounts are paid to people who have higher levels of disability and whose disability arises at an early age. The maximum amount that can be paid from April 2009 is just over £74,000 for a person who is 37 years old or under at diagnosis. Lower amounts are payable to dependants who claim after the sufferer has died.

The regulations will help to ensure that the compensation that is provided under the Order maintains its value in line with the rate of inflation. I am sure that all Members will welcome the regulations warmly.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson):** At its meeting on 26 February 2009, the Committee for Social Development considered the Department's proposal to introduce The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009, and on 12 March, it considered the statutory rule. The regulations will increase the amounts that are payable to the sufferers of certain dust-related diseases — or their dependants — who have been unable to claim damages from the relevant employer because that employer is no longer in business.

Dust-related diseases can take a long time to develop and may not be diagnosed until a considerable number of years after exposure. Therefore, it may be a common scenario that the employer that is responsible for the dust exposure is no longer in business when claims arise.

Although no amount of money could compensate for the misery and suffering that is caused by diseases such as pneumoconiosis, the amounts that are payable will offer some assistance to sufferers and their dependants. It is important that the compensation increases and that those amounts keep pace with inflation. In conclusion, the Committee recommends that the Assembly affirm the statutory rule.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the introduction of the regulations. Pneumoconiosis is a particularly nasty and debilitating condition that, as has been stated, takes a long time to manifest itself in many cases. Therefore, under the new regulations, people who, because the

relevant employer no longer exists, had no recourse to any other form of compensation will receive compensation. I welcome the regulations. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Ms Lo:** Like the Members who spoke previously, I welcome this new piece of legislation, which is fair, humane and compassionate. People who have contracted such conditions through work suffer greatly, and it is important that, where the employer cannot look after them, we make their lives easier.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I am pleased with the consensus of support in the Assembly for the regulations. I thank Mr Simpson, the Committee for Social Development, Mr Brady and Ms Lo for the positive way in which they dealt with the regulations. Mr Simpson made an apt point; no amount of compensation will ever cover the misery and suffering that people endure as a result of those illnesses.

I am certain that all Members want to ensure that inflation does not erode the value of compensation under the 1979 Order. It is important that the Assembly and the Executive deal with the matter in line with parity. The regulations will ensure that inflation does not erode compensation rates and that people in Northern Ireland who suffer from those ailments receive the amount to which they are entitled. I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

## **The Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics (Northern Ireland) Order 2009**

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

That the Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

The Order is part of a wider programme of work implementing the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007. That Act established an independent United Kingdom Statistics Authority to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics, and it requires the introduction of secondary legislation in Northern Ireland setting out rules and principles to be followed when granting pre-release access to official Northern Ireland devolved statistics.

Pre-release access to statistics is access primarily by Ministers and officials to the final statistics in the form in which they are to be published in advance of their release. The aim of pre-release access is to enable Ministers at the time of release to account for the implications of the policy areas for which they are responsible. It also allows Ministers and their supporting officials to take any immediate action that might be required in light of the statistical information being released.

Under current arrangements, Ministers and certain officials have privileged access to statistics ahead of their publication of up to five days' pre-release access in general and up to 40·5 hours for market-sensitive statistics. It is considered necessary to change the arrangements because pre-release access is sometimes cited as a contributing factor to problems of trust and confidence in official statistics.

There is no reason to believe that there is a problem of substance in Northern Ireland, but the Executive are committed to tackling any perception of interference in statistics. The Cabinet Office is responsible for bringing forward similar proposals for the UK Government, including the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), and the key elements of their legislation — which came into operation on 1 December 2008 — are limiting pre-release access to a strict maximum of 24 hours; requiring that pre-release access be limited to the minimum necessary number of people and the minimum number of statistics; and requiring that, where pre-release access is granted, it should be done in an open and transparent manner, with details documented and published.

There were no Northern Ireland-specific responses to the UK Government's public consultation on the issue in 2008. Executive Ministers were consulted in 2008, and replies were supportive of the changes incorporated in the legislation. The Northern Ireland statistics advisory committee was also consulted and fully endorsed the proposals. In addition, as required

by the legislation, the UK Statistics Authority, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and Scottish and Welsh Ministers have all been consulted, and there are no unresolved issues.

The Executive, at their meeting on 20 November 2008, approved the making of the pre-release Order, broadly reflecting arrangements in place at UK-Government level, including the NIO. Thus it is proposed that pre-release access will be limited to a strict maximum of 24 hours, be limited to the minimum necessary number of people and the minimum number of statistics, and, where pre-release access is granted, it should be done in an open and transparent manner.

The need for pre-release access to a publication, and the people who are to be granted access, will be reviewed ahead of the release of the relevant statistics. In Northern Ireland, as at UK level, decisions on pre-release access will be led by statistical professionals. Each Northern Ireland Department will be expected to implement the new arrangements and publish a compliance statement to that effect.

Once pre-release access to a statistic in a final form has been granted, it will be under embargo, which means that its contents cannot be shared with others until the point of publication. Those granted pre-release access to statistics must, as now, not alter, or attempt to alter, the content or timing of the releases or the way in which they are presented. The pre-release access period must not be used for personal or political gain. Pre-release access may be removed from anyone who knowingly breaches those rules.

The rules ensure that pre-release will take place in an open, clear and transparent manner, with clear accountability; that represents a tightening of current practice. Passage of the Order will also ensure consistency with the position at a United Kingdom-level, including the Northern Ireland Office. The new arrangements will be reviewed after 12 months of operation.

The Order has been considered by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and no objections have been raised. I, therefore, commend the Order to the Assembly.

11.30 am

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to make it clear that I am speaking as the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and I will confine myself to speaking in that capacity.

I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the Department's proposal to make this subordinate legislation at its meeting on 25 February 2009 and

agreed that it was content with the policy implications of the proposed legislation at that stage. The rule was subsequently laid in the Assembly, and the Committee considered that rule and the accompanying report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules on 18 March. The Committee agreed to recommend that the rule be affirmed. However, it sought clarification from the Department of Finance and Personnel on issues contained in the explanatory memorandum, which does not form part of the legislation. The Minister mentioned that in his statement.

The explanatory memorandum states that under current arrangements, Ministers may have up to 40·5 hours' access to market-sensitive statistics prior to publication. The Committee was intrigued by the mention of the 40·5 hours' access period. The purpose of pre-release access is to enable Ministers and certain officials to account for the policy implications of statistics at the time of publication and, in certain circumstances, to be in a position to announce policy decisions when the data is released. The Committee was informed that the 40·5-hour period originates in the release practices protocol of the National Statistics Code of Practice, which will be superseded by the new arrangements in the 2009 Order. That 40·5-hour period means that, where privileged early access to market-sensitive statistics is granted, it will begin at 5.00 pm on day one, in advance of the release of the data at 9.30 am on day three.

Under the new arrangements, pre-release access for all official statistics will be limited to a strict maximum of 24 hours, and no distinction will be made between market-sensitive and non-market-sensitive statistics. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered that further information on 25 March and agreed that it was content. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

**Mr O'Loan:** I want to express my support for the Order. The issue is important, but, as the Minister said, it is less significant for a devolved region than it is for Westminster. I want to express my appreciation of the work of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), which provides an excellent service to Government. Statistics and research information from NISRA can be treated with a great deal of respect.

There is an important principle involved. There should be a necessary distance between Ministers and those who compile and issue statistics. The statistics that are issued can be politically relevant and, at times, embarrassing for Government. Therefore, the controls that are contained in the Order are important.

It is good that, in principle, we are moving to a maximum 24 hours of pre-access and the other restrictions on the persons to whom statistics are divulged that the Minister mentioned. Previously, as I understand it,

there was a mere convention about a five-day access period in certain instances and 40·5 hours for market-sensitive information. The narrower period is desirable and indicates that the maintenance of a necessary distance is being properly considered.

I have one question for the Minister. Certain statistics will be issued according to a predetermined timetable. Are there other statistics that are issued at the determination of a particular person? Is there any discussion between those who issue statistics and Ministers as to the appropriate time period in which a set of statistics that might have political implications is issued?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I am grateful to the two Members who contributed to the debate and put forward the views of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I welcome their remarks, and I thank the Chairperson of the Committee and its members, who scrutinised the Order.

Mr O'Loan raised an issue about access to statistics. He also pointed out, quite rightly, that a debt of gratitude is owed to the people who are involved in this area of work, such as those from NISRA, my Department and statisticians in general, because they do fine work on behalf of the public. It is important that I put that on the record.

As regards another issue that Mr O'Loan raised, Ministers will be aware of the statistics to be issued; however, they will be unaware of the actual content of those until 24 hours beforehand. I hope that that assures the Member.

I ask Members to affirm the Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, which should come into operation from 1 April 2009.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That the Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Domestic Violence

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

**Ms J McCann:** I beg to move

That this Assembly deplores any instance of domestic violence and its implications for children, young people and vulnerable adults; calls on the Executive to bring forward proposals to ensure full access to refuge for persons affected and to address the issue of access to legal aid for vulnerable families; and further calls for adequate funding for the relevant support groups and community organisations in their campaigns and work in tackling domestic violence.

I ask the Assembly to support this important motion. I apologise on behalf of my colleague Sue Ramsey who cannot be here to move the motion because she is ill.

Domestic violence is a crime, and it is a violation of article 5 of the UN Universal Declarations of Human Rights. The impact of domestic violence on families is devastating. Statistics estimate that a quarter of all women experience some form of domestic abuse at some stage in their lives and that almost half the women who are murdered here are killed by their partners.

Anyone can be a victim of domestic violence. Victims can be any age, sex, race, culture and religion. They can be from any social background, be employed or unemployed, and they can have any marital status. The violence can include physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Although men and women can be abused, most victims are women and children. A significant number of elderly people also suffer abuse and neglect in their own homes at the hands of relatives.

Recent research indicates that almost 11,000 children in the North of Ireland live in homes in which violence occurs and that there is a strong link between domestic violence and the mistreatment of children. Children and young people can often be the forgotten victims of domestic violence, and the abuse can have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences for them.

In families in which there is domestic violence, children are also frequently abused by the violent parent. That can have damaging, long-term effects on their mental health, their sense of identity and their ability to form relationships. Domestic abuse can affect a child's performance at school and can lead to severe behavioural problems, and, sometimes, suicidal feelings. Domestic violence can also increase the risk of a child self-harming, misusing drugs and alcohol, and running away from home.

In the longer term, domestic abuse can make children feel socially and emotionally excluded and lead to problems well into their adult lives. Essential support work with children and young people that Women's Aid and other organisations carry out needs to be properly resourced and funded.

One of the key areas of prevention that has been identified is that of preventing domestic abuse from happening in the first place by changing public attitudes to it. It has also been recognised that such an awareness campaign must take place in schools. Preventative work in schools is carried out on an ad hoc basis, and, therefore, it is crucial that the Department of Education introduces preventative programmes as part of the school curriculum. Work in schools and within local communities sends out an essential message to children and young people that violence towards them or against a parent or relative is not acceptable behaviour, and, indeed, that it is unacceptable behaviour.

We need to ensure that there are services and support in place, especially refuges, so that anyone who is a victim of domestic violence can access them. Women's Aid has identified a number of gaps in refuge provision, including support for women with complex mental-health needs, women who have issues with drug and alcohol misuse and women with teenage sons. There is also a problem for women and children who are victims of domestic violence and have limited or no access to public funds.

In the North, approximately 50% of the population are not eligible for legal aid, and a further 25% are entitled to only partial assistance. As I said, that includes women whose immigration status prevents them from accessing the support services that they need. Very often, the support organisations have to pick up the costs, which can have an impact on other areas of their work. Therefore, it is important that an emergency fund is set up to ensure that all victims of domestic violence can access the support and refuge services that they need.

Partnership working and inter-agency support will ensure that adequate provision of refuges and services to support victims of domestic violence is maintained and developed. Recent statistics show that there has been an increase in the incidence of domestic violence being reported to the PSNI. It is believed that a combination of factors, including a Government advertising campaign and a more proactive approach in recognising domestic abuse as a crime, are responsible for that.

Despite changes from the situation several years ago, there are still problems in the civil and criminal justice system in the North of Ireland with regard to domestic violence cases. Women still do not have full confidence in the criminal justice system due to their experiences when attempting to get their partners

prosecuted. Evidence shows that there is leniency towards perpetrators of domestic violence, who receive sentences that are much shorter than if their crime had been committed against a stranger. So, further steps are needed to ensure that the issue of violence against women overall, and domestic violence specifically, are given an appropriate importance in the Government's policy on crime reduction and community safety.

Further changes are earmarked in the 'protection and justice' section of the Tackling Violence at Home strategy action plan, including training for the Public Prosecution Service and other justice agencies. That is to be welcomed as it will result in women feeling more positive about seeking help. As I said earlier, the lack of access to legal aid and the £400 cost of a non-molestation order add an unnecessary financial burden on victims who are already suffering.

There is a real need for political direction to ensure that a clear and consistent message is provided alongside a co-ordinated approach to tackle the scourge of domestic violence and to provide the support and protection that victims and survivors need. The Tackling Violence at Home strategy has the potential to make a fundamental shift in how society responds to domestic violence. However, its full implementation will require innovative thinking by all Government Departments and by those working in the statutory, voluntary, community and business sectors.

One of the Tackling Violence at Home strategy's successes was the high-profile publicity campaign that I mentioned, which resulted in an increase in the number of victims contacting the 24-hour helpline and other services. That has brought an improved focus and co-ordination in dealing with domestic violence on a cross-functional basis. We have also seen a range of associated policy developments that are designed to deal with awareness training, prevention, supporting victims and dealing with offenders.

There is also a need to shift the focus onto the abuser and to introduce new compulsory rehabilitation programmes, and develop existing ones, as part of a preventative campaign. That, alongside the training mechanisms for agencies involved in tackling domestic violence, which are set out in the strategy, will ensure a more co-ordinated approach.

All of us here need to give political leadership on the issue of domestic violence and ensure that the Tackling Violence at Home strategy is properly implemented and resourced. Debates such as this will raise awareness on the issue for women, children and anyone else suffering domestic violence in local communities and who is living every day with the fear and threat of such violence.

I ask all Members to support the motion, because all of us have a responsibility to ensure that all the sufferers

and survivors of domestic violence have access to the support and the services that they need. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

11.45 am

**Mr I McCrea:** I thank the Members who tabled this important motion, which I have no difficulty in supporting. I also want to record my full support for groups such as Women's Aid. They do an excellent job in helping those affected by domestic violence.

I want to mention, and pay gratitude to, the staff in the Cookstown Women's Aid centre in my constituency. I know the staff and support their efforts. I know the difficulties that they have and the problems that they face in dealing with women who suffer domestic violence.

All too often, in a debate such as this, we speak of facts, figures and statistics. I have no doubt that we will hear those today, but I want to speak about a real matter — a woman of whom I am aware who has suffered domestic violence. I hope that it puts today's debate into perspective.

Social services referred this woman and her three children to a refuge in November 2008. The woman had extensive injuries and had been taken to hospital for examination. An incident had taken place at her home. She had been severely beaten and abused by her husband: she sustained bruising to her face, chest, arms, and abdomen; her eyes were swollen and bloodshot; she had a fractured finger; and her lower arm was put in plaster.

A PSNI domestic violence officer attended the refuge to obtain a statement from the woman, and, together with social services, visited her on a number of occasions during her first week in the refuge. The refuge staff immediately began to work with the woman through a needs assessment and support plan, which incorporates the cycle of violence, healthy and unhealthy relationships, control and power, and the effects of domestic violence on children.

The victim was enrolled on the Journey to Freedom and My Life, My Choices programmes, both of which are self-esteem courses that help to bring women through domestic violence and to begin to move on. She also took part in the You and Me, Mum course, which considers the effects of domestic violence on children, and she attended a personal safety seminar organised by Women's Aid and facilitated by the PSNI community safety officer. She also attended a Delta parenting programme and a pharmacy programme that examined topics such as over-the-counter medication, healthy eating, smoking cessation and anti-depressant usage.

Unfortunately, the woman was unable to leave the refuge until after 6.00 pm because she was afraid that her partner might be in the vicinity. She went to her solicitor, and her children were appointed a guardian

ad litem. The woman attended court on a number of occasions and was again supported by the refuge staff during the hearings.

As a result of the domestic violence perpetrated on this woman, she could not return to her home and had to terminate her tenancy agreement. Her furniture and belongings had to be placed in storage. She then applied for housing in another area and has been on the social housing waiting list since November 2008. There are no suitable houses available to rehouse her and her children.

Her perpetrator was released from prison in February 2009 and immediately made it known that he was going to get his wife and children back as a family. Consequently, the three children were removed from the refuge and placed in foster care for their own safety and protection.

The sad reality is that the children are still in a foster placement, although they regularly attend the refuge to visit their mother. The perpetrator continues to try to contact the woman and has called at the refuge on two occasions so far. The children are the forgotten victims in this case; they have been removed from their mother for their own safety.

There is no doubt that there is a real need for support groups such as Women's Aid, but they cannot provide that service without adequate funding. Domestic violence continues to destroy the lives of hundreds of vulnerable adults and children throughout Northern Ireland. As elected representatives, we need to do everything within our power to ensure that support is available for victims, whether through full access to refuges, legal aid to vulnerable families or funding for support groups. I support the motion.

**Mr McCallister:** Domestic abuse is a blight on our society. It is, unfortunately, much more common and widespread than society at large cares to recognise.

In Northern Ireland, police respond to reports of domestic abuse every 23 minutes. The police receive more than 60 such reports every day. However, those figures mask the countless untold cases of abuse and the misery that abuse brings to individuals and their families. Indeed, Ian McCrea, a Member for Mid Ulster, has just given us one such example.

By its very nature, domestic abuse happens behind closed doors and between intricately connected people; therefore, there is often a tendency for others to ignore it and for those who suffer to excuse it. It is crucial that we send out a clear and concise message that domestic violence is categorically wrong, that those who suffer from it are not to blame, and that they will gain the full support that they need from the police, the courts and health and social services providers in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Storey:** Without making domestic violence in any way a political issue, last October, my colleague

Lord Morrow asked the Health Minister — who I am glad is here for today's very important debate — to detail the number of hospital or GP treatments, broken down by male and female, that were the result of domestic violence or abuse. The answer was that that information was not available.

Will the Member join us today in asking the Minister to consider that issue, which was referred to by my colleague the Member from Mid Ulster? It is vital that victims who go to hospital are identified and treated in accordance with the very serious issues that are raised.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member join me in welcoming the development — led by the Policing Board — that all reported incidents of domestic violence are now split by gender and by the relationship between the attacker and the victim? That policy has evolved over a year's work, during which people have had to look at the statistics. Indeed, good statistics lead to good politics.

**Mr McCallister:** I thank both my colleague Basil McCrea and Mervyn Storey, a Member for North Antrim, for their useful interventions. The key message is that there must be a co-ordinated approach, and, as Basil McCrea said, the figures are needed in order to ensure that the right responses and proper policies on how to tackle this scourge are adopted.

We must not forget that domestic abuse, although commonly physical, can also be sexual, psychological or financial. It affects women and children and sometimes men. About 20% of domestic abuse begins during pregnancy and is often associated with alcohol and drug abuse. We must reduce domestic abuse, and to do so requires a co-ordinated and joined-up approach across all the relevant Departments that links charities and community groups into a joint strategy.

I strongly welcome the establishment of an inter-ministerial group on domestic and sexual violence, which is chaired by the Minister of Health and by the NIO. That group provides leadership and ensures that we undertake joint work across the relevant Departments. The group's regional strategy, *Tackling Sexual Violence and Abuse*, is also extremely welcome and is intended to guide policy and service responses from the healthcare, education and criminal justice systems.

The regional strategy focuses on three main areas that I believe are critical if we are to make progress. Those areas are: prevention; protection; and justice and support. The strategy also has an overarching leadership and direction strand that will guide and help to co-ordinate policy.

I draw Members' attention to the jointly funded 24-hour domestic violence helpline, which provides information, advice and support to all victims of domestic violence. I bring that helpline to the attention of all those people who may be suffering, and I urge them to

utilise it. I also note the annual media campaign, which has resulted in more people contacting the helpline.

We are moving in the right direction, and the Executive can do much more to help people who need refuge and access to legal aid. However, there is a framework in place with which we can work. I thank the Minister, who will respond to today's debate, for facilitating that co-ordinating role. Along with the Northern Ireland Office, his Department is playing a key role in addressing the issue of domestic violence.

**Mrs Hanna:** I support the motion and thank the Members who brought it to the Floor.

Domestic violence is recognised as a major social problem throughout the world. The real extent of the problem is unknown, because many cases go unreported. I agree that the Executive must prioritise making access to appropriate services and protection available to anyone who is a victim of domestic violence.

Over the past 30 years, some distance has been travelled in accepting that domestic violence exists. I pay tribute to everyone, such as Women's Aid and others in the voluntary sector, who petitioned tirelessly for that recognition, and for the funding to establish refuges.

In the past 10 years, inter-agency co-operation has increased considerably, and an interdepartmental working group has been established. In 2004, a regional steering group was set up with subgroups focusing on children and young people, domestic violence, violence and the law, and information. The Family Homes and Domestic Violence (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 offers some protection through non-molestation and occupation orders, particularly the exclusion order that forbids entrance to the home or surrounding areas. The role of domestic violence officers in the PSNI has developed, and local domestic violence partnerships have been established.

Despite all that progress, domestic violence remains a problem. According to a report by the NIO and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, *'Tackling Violence at Home'*, domestic violence:

"occurs right across our society and it has devastating consequences for the victims".

The report emphasises the particularly devastating effect on children, estimating:

"at least 11,000 children ... are living with domestic violence."

The report also contains the following statistics on domestic violence:

"It accounts for one in five cases of violent crime here ... on average every year 5 people are killed ... and about 700 families have to be re-housed."

It continues:

"On average every day in Northern Ireland, 12 women and 4 men are victims of domestic-related assaults ... it is estimated that

one in five women and one in nine men will experience domestic violence in the course of their lifetime."

That violence will, most likely, be at the hands of a partner.

As someone who has worked in the community and with victims of domestic violence, I am aware that I am speaking too academically. As mentioned, there are many facts, figures and statistics on domestic violence, but every fact, figure and statistic represents someone who is crying out for help. I wonder why some people use gratuitous violence: is it due to inadequacy, a desire for control or simply badness, sometimes fuelled by alcohol? A good Health Service here helps and heals, but gratuitous violence is extremely challenging to address. It is extremely difficult always to keep the people who are hurting and crying at the forefront of our minds, but domestic violence affects people.

The domestic violence freephone helpline receives approximately 20,000 calls a year, and many incidents, as Members know, are not reported. 'Tackling Violence at Home', the paper published in October 2005, and signed off by direct rule Ministers as current strategy, defines domestic violence as:

"threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on one person by another where they are or have been intimate partners or family members, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation."

We have reached a stage where we must examine how we deal with domestic violence. We must think particularly about the children who have, perhaps, witnessed domestic violence and been rushed to a refuge by their mother. Notwithstanding the violence, those children leave behind everything that is familiar, including their friends, and they may have to change school when they are vulnerable.

Other children may not have witnessed the violence. When they are removed to a refuge, they do not understand why and become bewildered and resentful.

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

**Mrs Hanna:** It is very important that there is access to the fathers. Furthermore, refuges have no facilities for older teenagers; therefore, we must consider how they can be looked after. There are so many issues, and I do not have time to go into all of them, on which we need to do much more work to deal with this issue.

12.00 noon

**Mrs Long:** I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing what is a very important issue back to the House. Domestic violence is an important issue, for not just the Assembly, but for society and for those who are its victims. Underpinning the debate around the issue must be a basic acceptance by everyone that the use, or threat, of violence is unacceptable in any

context. The fact that it takes place behind closed doors does not excuse it in any way, nor does it lessen the impact that it has on society. The Assembly must be united in sending out that message today.

Domestic violence is also a complex and multifaceted issue. It damages not only the target of the abuse, but it affects children, the wider family, their community, their neighbours and their friends. We need to try to tap into those wider networks in order to give people support, so that they feel comfortable and safe in coming forward to report domestic violence.

Many Members have mentioned the statistics, and I apologise for not having been able to be in the Chamber for all those speeches. I think that the statistics show the tip of the iceberg, because many people do not report domestic violence. Indeed, many people do not recognise the treatment that they receive in their home as domestic violence. It is worth noting that the formal definition of domestic violence is threatening behaviour, violence or abuse on one person by another, where they are, or have been, intimate partners or family members, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation.

The use of, for example, threatening and controlling behaviour is often underestimated, but it can be a way in which people condition a victim to accept the abuse that is meted out to them. It is important that people who are subjected to that kind of controlling and abusive behaviour feel confident and secure in bringing it to the attention of the appropriate authorities at an early stage.

**Mr McCarthy:** Does the Member agree that the recent high-profile case in which the judiciary was seen to be lacking in sentencing for that very crime would not encourage people to come forward voluntarily?

**Mrs Long:** I agree with the Member that when sentencing seems to be light or inappropriate, or when issues are not taken seriously enough, it is a major disincentive to many people who are living with this problem in silence. It is also true when people feel that their complaint is not taken seriously when they report it, when there is not an adequate response, or when they feel that, having done everything that they have been advised to do, they are often left high and dry with very little support.

It is important that people are not put in that position, because we need to build confidence with those who are abused, so that, when they come forward, their position will be taken seriously and action will be taken to protect them, because, very often, when people present it is because they are in fear of their lives. It does not send out a strong message to people if they are back in the same situation a few months later, having received little practical support. Therefore, I totally agree with the Member on that point.

The Northern Ireland Office crime survey indicated that 11% of respondents aged 16 to 59 identified

themselves as being victims of domestic violence. Of those respondents, 15% were females and 9% were males.

The issue of domestic violence against men is often overlooked, and it is significantly under-reported. We must be acutely aware of that when we look at how we handle domestic violence and the construction of, and arrangements for, support services. Men who are subjected to domestic abuse often find it difficult to talk about, and they feel emasculated by what is happening to them. Therefore, it is important that adequate time and effort is put into ensuring that any mechanisms that are put in place to support victims of domestic violence can cope with all victims of domestic violence. It is also important that we send out the message to both men and women who have been subjected to domestic abuse that it is not their fault.

One of the very disturbing statistics that was highlighted in the NIO's 'Experience of Domestic Violence: Findings from the 2007/2008 Northern Ireland Crime Survey' was that 23% of female respondents reported being the victim of threats and violence during pregnancy. The proposers of the motion indicated their desire to assist vulnerable groups, and there can be no more of a vulnerable group than that of unborn children; yet, they are being subjected to stress and abuse while still in the womb. Indeed, it is horrific to consider that someone would feel that they were in a position to abuse a pregnant woman when most people feel that it should be a time to be protective of a person. That is clearly very disturbing.

I visited a number of women's refuges, and I talked to a number of women who have been subjected to violent and life-threatening abuse from their spouses. As a result, I am conscious of the difficulty that those women often have in being able to proceed through the civil courts because of the cost involved.

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

**Mrs Long:** It is often the case that part of the abuse is in the control of finances. Therefore, the need to pay for orders to keep the partner away from a victim can be prohibitive. That must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Lord Morrow:** As my colleague Ian McCrea intimated, the DUP supports the motion. However, as one carefully reads it, it becomes clear that certain aspects could and should have been added to it. For example, there should have been some reference that acknowledged and further encouraged the role of the police. Indeed, I was interested to hear what Basil McCrea had to say about the Policing Board taking an interest in the issue of domestic violence. That does not in any way imply that they were ever uninterested, but I know that it has an input.

The use of violence, either on or off the streets, is an issue of importance to everyone. However it seems

from reading the documents that were placed at Members' disposal that violence off the street, or domestic violence, is treated differently from violence on the street. A judge recently commented that he felt frustrated by the fact that legislation, in effect, differentiated between domestic violence and an assault that takes place on the street. He was also concerned by the continued insistence of the Public Prosecution Service in sending summonses to perpetrators of domestic violence by post rather than them being personally delivered and served, which therefore does not command the immediate presence of the accused in court.

Thus, there is a differentiation between what happens in the home and what happens on the street. However, I cannot understand why the law should be different. I hope that as a result of today's debate, some of the issues that have been articulated around the Chamber will be examined and that some positive and decisive action will be taken.

I draw the attention of Members to some of the statistics that have been placed before us. In preparation for today's debate, I reflected on whether domestic violence was applicable across the entire spectrum in Northern Ireland, and one very interesting statistic from the NIO's crime survey shows:

"Respondents with a Protestant community background (13%) were more likely to report having experienced domestic violence than those with a Roman Catholic community background (9%)."

Right away one asks why that is the case, and that is where I see a fundamental weakness in the motion. Does that say that there is hesitancy from those from a Roman Catholic background to report domestic violence to the police, whereas the same hesitancy does not persist in the Protestant community?

If that is the case — and I will leave it to others to decide whether it is — the motion should have acknowledged that there is a PSNI dimension to the issue and that those who suffer from domestic violence should not be reluctant in any way to call in the police to deal with the matter.

I think that it was Carmel Hanna who said that 11,000 children are affected by situations of domestic violence, and I am sure that that statistic is somewhere in the notes that I have been given. It was good that that point was brought out, because the children have to be protected as much as the person who is being battered and at the receiving end of the domestic violence. Therefore, the Assembly has to send out the strong message that the elected representatives in the House will not differentiate and that they want full co-operation on the issue with our policing authority, namely, the PSNI. It is vital that that message goes out.

**Mr B McCrea:** I support Lord Morrow's comments that the excellent work of the PSNI, which has been recognised by Women's Aid and other bodies, should

be recognised by all Members. He raised the issue of statistics, but he may not know that there has been a dramatic rise in reports of domestic abuse and domestic violence in areas west of the Bann. Although one does not welcome the fact that such abuse happens, one welcomes that it is reported. The community must report those things to the police.

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Member for making those valuable points. He has drawn attention to something that I turned up as he was speaking. The PSNI's statistical report number 2, 'Domestic Incidents and Crimes, 1 April 2007 — 31 March 2008' states:

"During 2007/08 more than two thirds of all crimes with domestic motivation fell within the category of violent crime... There were 6,389 such offences, representing 68.8% of the total. Of the remaining offences, criminal damage accounted for 14.9%".

That brings me to my earlier point.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

**Lord Morrow:** If those crimes of domestic violence are deemed as criminal, why are the associated summonses delivered in a different way than those for street crime, for instance? That should be looked at.

**Mr B McCrea:** I agree with a great deal of what Lord Morrow said. In particular, I do not understand sentencing policy. Everybody was shocked at the recent football hooliganism and the effects of violence on our street. However, when such violence takes place in the home, it seems that it is viewed on a different scale. In such cases, we seem to be satisfied with suspended sentences or plea bargaining, for instance, and I find that unacceptable.

I want to talk about the role of the Public Prosecution Service, the victims and the reason that people do not feel able to come forward and report crimes of domestic violence.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Lord Morrow's comment was valid, but I think that the reporting of cases of domestic violence requires that there is a trust and confidence in the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) more so than in the PSNI. The issues that Basil McCrea alluded to, such as the stigma that is felt by victims and the equality of horror and how that is reflected in sentencing, are massive issues that need to be tackled.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am grateful to the Member for her intervention; I agree with her. I should declare an interest as the chairperson of the human rights and professional standards committee. Along with Women's Aid, the Rainbow Project and the Men's Advisory Service, that committee spent a year looking at the issue of how the police have got to grips with encouraging victims of domestic violence to come forward. That has been one of the successes. All parties were represented, and they did excellent work.

That is the key issue. People ask why victims do not come forward. People are afraid that if they come forward, worse will happen to them. We have to reassure people of whatever sex, religion, or background that if they come forward and explain that there is a problem, society will protect them.

12.15 pm

The figures are shocking. It is said that one in four women will be subject to some form of domestic abuse in their lifetime, but one in nine men will also suffer such abuse, and that issue must be highlighted. Problems are experienced also by people in same-sex relationships and by people from the Travelling community. Those issues are under-reported because society will not take them on.

Carál Ní Chuilín mentioned the PPS, and I challenge the PPS to find a way of looking after victims properly. It is demeaning to victims to go through a year-long court case only to be considered an adjunct or someone who is almost simply a witness, to be unsure whether they will be called to give evidence, and to be, in effect, subject to people plea-bargaining — we have to change that. That is a challenge to the PPS and to the judiciary.

When the time is right, the House should consider establishing specialist courts with specialist lawyers and judges. We ask why people do not resist violence or stay in a violent relationship for so long; however, once we understand the complex psychological reasons, the issue will become clearer. We must send an unequivocal message that we will not tolerate violence against the most vulnerable members of our society.

Lord Morrow talked about equivalence and asked why it seems that violence outside the home is regarded as more of a crime than violence inside it. That argument could be taken a step further and it could be said that there is a fundamental breakdown in trust when someone is used and abused over many years in their home, which should be their sanctuary. That is what makes domestic abuse all the more heinous.

**Ms Lo:** I support what the Member is saying, but an important point that may not yet have been touched upon is the importance of preventative work. Education, school programmes and informal education in a youth group can be used to teach young people about relationships, violence and respect for one's partner.

**Mr B McCrea:** I agree with Ms Lo: the perpetrators of domestic abuse do not think that they have done anything wrong. They do not see the moral argument; they think that their behaviour is OK, but it is not OK. There must be a huge sentence for those people — we must get the sentencing right and send a clear message in the only language that they understand.

We must also look at non-molestation orders. Do people realise that it costs between £500 and £600 to

obtain such an order? One of the advances that the Policing Board has made is that it will now report separately on those issues so that breaking a non-molestation order will be regarded as a crime. In conclusion, this an area in which we can work collectively to do some good. I want the Assembly collectively to send a clear and unequivocal message that domestic violence against anyone is totally unacceptable.

**Miss McIlveen:** I support the motion. The issues detailed in the motion have been addressed very well by previous Members, so, conscious of time and the complexity of the issue, I will focus primarily on the perpetrators of violence and the impact of violence on families.

Possibly the most tragic aspect of domestic violence, which was highlighted by Mrs Hanna, is that more than 11,000 children in Northern Ireland will witness or be subject to domestic violence. Despite the existence of the inter-departmental group and strategy, every day the police receive about 60 reports of domestic abuse. To date, attention has been primarily on adult victims, but there is a need to focus also on tackling the perpetrators of domestic abuse, both in relation to the rigor of the law and possible treatment. Priority must be given to instances when the perpetrators of domestic violence are parents, given the potential risk that they can pose to the children who are in their homes.

**Mrs Long:** Anna Lo referred to the importance of education. Does the Member accept that often those who abuse and who are abused are conditioned by their experiences of watching other relationships around them? That allows them to accept such a relationship as normal for much longer than for many of those who have not had those experiences, and, therefore, the support and counselling to which the Member refers are absolutely critical?

**Miss McIlveen:** I agree with the Member. It is a huge issue for those who have experienced or witnessed domestic violence in their homes.

The issues of power and control are at the root of domestic abuse and violence, and those are most unlikely to begin and end with a partner. Research shows that children who live in a domestic violence setting are also likely to suffer physical abuse or are at a much higher risk of sexual abuse. Recent tragedies such as the McElhill fire tragedy in Omagh highlight the need for all the appropriate agencies to listen to children's concerns about domestic violence.

Although I do not want to detract from the excellent work being done by the PSNI, an issue that has been raised, and is of concern, is the fact that reporting of domestic abuse has been removed as a specific performance indicator from the Policing Plan 2009-2012. In a report published earlier this month, the human rights and professional standards committee of

the Northern Ireland Policing Board expressed concerns about the reporting of domestic abuse and about how statistics were gathered, and it indicated that any report of a domestic abuse incident should flag up whether a child or children might be at risk.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Member points out various issues. However, I want to reassure her that domestic abuse is referred to on page 13 of the Policing Plan: it is a high priority. The specific issue of reporting to which the Member refers will be discussed at next week's Policing Board meeting, when there will be a full report from the deputy chief constable as part of a six-month campaign. It will provide all the statistics that the Member needs, and I am sure that she will join me in welcoming the report.

**Miss McIlveen:** I thank the Member for that additional information. I welcome the report, its outcomes and any impact that it may have.

Even if perpetrators of domestic abuse are convicted and are parents, serious concerns remain about the contact that they will have with their children. Perpetrators could be convicted of grievous bodily harm and receive a suspended sentence, yet no assessment will be made in relation to their parenting or the contact that they have with their children.

Barnardo's provides services to children who have experienced domestic violence, and there are serious concerns that children are often placed in unsafe situations. It is essential that the courts recognise the impact of a perpetrator's domestic violence on children and assess a perpetrator's future contact on the basis of that risk.

Although a non-abusive parent in a domestic violence setting will often have had his or her parenting assessed by social services, a perpetrator will often not have. Unfortunately, there is no process or service in Northern Ireland where that can take place. That undermines the safety of children and reduces the impact of convictions. Indeed, women are often expected to manage child contact with a former violent partner themselves. There is an urgent need for perpetrators to have their parenting assessed.

Furthermore, courts must take account of the impact of domestic violence on contact situations and develop a model for assessing the perpetrator's parenting and risk factors. There is only one course available in Northern Ireland for perpetrators of domestic violence that is aimed at addressing their behaviour, and it is available only to those who have been convicted. It is not available to those who have not been convicted but want to change their behaviour voluntarily. The course has a 30% completion rate. There is no current assessment of the extent to which the abusive behaviour is likely to change or its impact on their parenting.

It is vital to recognise that domestic violence is a crime and deserves a tough response from the criminal justice system. There is also the need for a service that can provide access to treatment that will seek to ensure long-term changes in behaviour, and it must be available to those who are convicted and those who wish to engage voluntarily.

We must ensure that the victims of domestic violence are not made to suffer further and that the non-abusive parent and children are not made to leave the family home, if that can be prevented. Therefore, I support the extension of the provision of safe rooms, not only to those in public housing but to owner-occupiers. It is time to focus on the needs of children — not only while the perpetrator is in the family home but after he or she has left — and to address the real and serious risks to children of a parent who is a perpetrator of domestic violence.

**Mrs M Bradley:** Between April 2007 and March 2008, 34 incidents of domestic violence were reported every week in my constituency of Foyle; the police told us that that is only the tip of the iceberg. Domestic violence can range from minor assaults through to murder. In order to encompass the wide aspects of the crime, the terminology was changed to “domestic abuse”.

Domestic abuse is not just a single action — it is the beginning of, or another episode in, a living hell for the victim that gives them a horrible life that nobody deserves. Women whom I would have perceived as strong individuals have been reduced to nervous wrecks who only exist excuse by excuse to cover the hideous pain and suffering that is inflicted upon them by an abusive partner.

Domestic abuse is not always a physical attack; sometimes, the mind games and psychological torture are more damaging. In half of the cases, the children of the victims are also ill-treated. It is a crime that is not restricted by class or creed, and it is a crime that is often silent and hidden by the victim themselves.

This Assembly has an objective to make things better for the people of Northern Ireland. For one in four women in Northern Ireland that means providing effective support mechanisms to allow them to have the confidence to get out of that hell. That act requires tremendous courage and enormous strength that sometimes cannot be summoned by the victim alone. If they go it alone, the realisation of what they have done can often prove too much, and they are desperate for help and support at that stage. If the Assembly cannot help the lead organisations to provide the proper support mechanisms for those victims, it will have failed in one of its most basic objectives.

Women's Aid — which is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland — is desperate to help to eradicate all forms of domestic abuse. It tries to

achieve that by using educational programmes that are aimed at preventative measures by teaching equality and respect in all relationships.

The 7% increase in statistics from 2006 to 2007 is chilling to say the least. From 2007 to 2008, the fact that the PSNI responded to a domestic incident every 23 minutes can scarcely be comprehended. It is not only about supporting families who are in crisis; it could be a case of life or death. We require a cross-departmental strategy that, in the first instance, can identify the signs of abuse and then act upon them — whether through its departmental sections or by providing support to properly constituted and experienced organisations.

To listen, as I have done, to a woman who is or has been a victim of domestic abuse is a sobering and frightening experience. The threat of financial ruin or the worry of how they will be able to care and provide for their children are all mental flash cards that scare them away from making the decision to leave. The initial loss of confidence, which is common to all the victims, is really only a heartbeat away from loss of life. That was a heartbreaking reality for the families of 44% of murder victims in Northern Ireland in 2007-08.

Some victims, even if they are employed, cannot afford to protect themselves with a non-molestation order as it is too expensive. The combined cost of both stages of such an order can be up to £800.

A victim is changed forever: their lives are scarred beyond the understanding of those of us who are lucky enough to have healthy relationships. They are certainly changed emotionally, and sometimes they are changed physically, depending on the type of abuse that was meted out to them. Abuse or a suspicion of abuse can now be reported by any concerned person. Since the legislation was changed last year, the report does not have to come from the victim. I urge anyone who has a suspicion to report it.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Member may be interested to know that part of the police direction is now that any suspicion of domestic abuse must be followed through. If there is any suggestion that people could be let off with a caution, it must be noted why a charge was not progressed. The maximum charge possible must be pressed rather than one that would secure an easy conviction.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I thank the Member for that welcome information.

As I said, I urge anyone who has suspicions that domestic violence is taking place to report it. That action could save a life. It may be that that one phone call or that one approach is enough for victims to break their silence finally and admit that they are, indeed, victims. When, and if, they do that, we must ensure that the correct strategies and support systems are in

place to help and encourage victims, whether male or female, to build a new and better life for themselves and their children. I support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.*

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

*2.00 pm*

**Mr Shannon:** I am pleased to be called to speak on the motion. This is an important issue, and the fact that the Chamber is not full and bursting with people does not take away from that.

There is an epidemic of domestic violence in Northern Ireland, and as elected representatives, every one of us can express that clearly. It is estimated that one in four women in the Province have been physically abused by a partner. In the majority of cases, it is found that alcohol misuse is the key factor. These are not isolated events.

Domestic violence is often hidden behind closed doors, as many women feel too ashamed to talk about it and are made to feel responsible for the abuse. The only way to break the taboo is to ensure that the subject is discussed properly and that the appropriate blame is laid on the correct shoulders. I am glad that the motion has been brought before the Assembly today; we need to show both victims and perpetrators that this awful crime is not a secret, that people are aware that it happens and that it is unacceptable in Northern Ireland. The shame lies on the shoulders of those who inflict their anger towards other people, which is the message that domestic violence charities strive to send out.

Here bes the crux o' the matther – domestic violence bes a vicious cycle at happens agin an' agin. An owre affen, quhan thaim at ir abused heid tae a shelter – they ir apt tae gae beck tae the abuser. Hit's mae notion at yin o' the reasons fer thon bes at es mich es the charities ettle aa gien a netwaark o' hefts – the ring-fenced catter maun bae thaire tae mak' siccar at charities laike Weemin's Aid hae eneuch prugh tae gie systems an' netwaarks at waark fu' time wi' trained volunteers an' ir ap tae date an' knaw bes' hoo tae get the message through tae the victim. Thon's where A wud agin urge Depairtments tae mak' siccar at unnerspend bes announced sae catter can gae tae projects laike the fecht agin domestic violence.

The crux of the matter is that domestic violence is a vicious and repetitive circle. All too often, people who have been abused go to a shelter but then return to their abuser. Charities try to provide a support network, but there must be ring-fenced funding to ensure that charities such as Women's Aid have the money to provide systems and networks that operate full time with trained and up-to-date volunteers who know how best to get the message through to the victim. I again urge Departments to ensure that underspends are announced so that money can be allocated to projects such as the fight against domestic violence.

A new public protection unit has recently been set up in my constituency of Strangford to deal with domestic violence and child abuse. There are very sensitive issues involving child abuse and protection, domestic violence and abuse, vulnerable and missing people and the need for violent and sexual offenders to be managed in the community. There is clear evidence of links between domestic abuse and child abuse, and my colleague Michelle McIlveen, among others, referred to that this morning.

There are examples of children running away to avoid physical and sexual abuse and, in many cases, the abuser's power over his or her victim leads to crimes not being reported to the police and evidence being hard to obtain. The creators of public protection units seek to identify links between cases and provide specialist support to victims and witnesses. We need funding in order to provide that support, which is needed across the Province.

I am happy to join with all other Members of the Assembly in saying that we are aware of domestic violence. We will do everything in our power as an Assembly, and as elected representatives, to eradicate the horrible statistic of one in four women in the Province having been abused. We are sending the message that it is never OK for someone to use their fists against a vulnerable person, whether that vulnerable person is a child, a woman or a man. I support the motion and the fight against all forms of domestic abuse in all homes.

**Dr McDonnell:** I, too, support the very valuable motion. My party and I believe that there is no excuse, explanation or justification for domestic violence in any of its forms, whether it is actual violence, threatened physical violence, sexual assault, damage to property or the much more sinister non-physical intimidation, such as persistent verbal abuse, emotional blackmail and enforced social and financial deprivation.

Domestic violence can take all those forms and many more. According to figures released by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, every day in Northern Ireland, 12 women and four men experience domestic violence. Alarming, one in five women and one in nine men will experience domestic violence at some stage in their lives.

It is deeply disturbing that at least 11,000 children in Northern Ireland live in proximity and close association with daily domestic violence; no child deserves or should have to put up with that.

As a GP in a previous existence, I have seen the serious long-term damage that domestic violence does to the victim — male or female, adult or child. I have witnessed the physical and mental suffering that they are forced to go through; the humiliation and the degradation; the low self-esteem, the depression, the

mental misery and the sense of being totally trapped — all of which leave serious mental scars, and perhaps physical scars as well. I have also seen how domestic violence can completely destroy young lives and young dreams.

Many children who live with violence in their homes end up suffering severe mental-health problems and other illnesses. They also suffer educational underachievement and a sense of marginalisation, and they often wander down the dangerous road of crime, antisocial behaviour and drug abuse. They often have an inability to form positive, healthy, constructive personal relationships.

A considerable amount of good work is done by support groups and community organisations, such as Women's Aid, in tackling domestic violence; however, more support could be provided if funding streams were more consistent and secure. The reporting of domestic violence to the PSNI has increased, but there is still significant under-reporting. Far too many people continue to suffer in silence. Women suffer for the sake of their children, and children suffer trying to keep the family together and often blame themselves for the anger, conflict and violence between their parents.

If we are serious about doing what we can to end this scourge on our society, we must develop a robust cross-departmental approach to supporting people in such circumstances. I welcome the Minister's plans, but I remain to be convinced that they will produce the necessary results and I urge the Executive — not just the Minister — to consult all the essential support organisations and victims to develop what we need: a robust system, adequately funded, pro-active and cross-departmental in outlook. This is not exclusively an issue for the Department of Health. Its Minister may lead on the issue, but it spills over into the responsibility of other agencies and Departments.

We could learn much from Scotland where a framework is in the advanced stages of development. A key part of our strategy must involve putting in place adequate support structures for victims, providing refuge accommodation and legal aid to empower victims to end abuse in their relationships. It should also be about changing attitudes and educating adults and children to know that domestic violence — wherever it occurs — is wrong, unacceptable and that there is help available to put a stop to it.

To suffer domestic violence and live in continual fear from a partner, parent or child is unimaginable to many of us, but it is reality for many people. An end must be put to that reality; the victim could be your relative or mine, your neighbour or mine. We cannot and must not stand back and ignore what goes on behind closed doors. Helping to end the despicable domestic violence that goes on might cost a small

amount of money but, in the end, it will be worth it to improve the quality of many lives.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member please bring his remarks to a close?

**Dr McDonnell:** I support the motion.

**Mr Lunn:** We, of course, support the motion. Its subject is very important, and I congratulate the proposer and her colleagues for bringing it back to the Assembly.

I do not want to repeat statistics, although it is very difficult not to repeat things when you are around seventeenth in the pecking order. However, one statistic that did jump out at me is that 23% of pregnant women are being abused by their husbands. I find that absolutely astonishing. That statistic is probably not even correct given that so many of those crimes go unreported. It is absolutely unbelievable. It makes me wonder what sort of society we have bred that allows such a statistic to be upheld.

It makes me wonder, too, about the rest of the statistics that have been mentioned. Surely, they are all under-representative given the failure and reluctance of women — I should say men as well, and perhaps particularly men — to report that type of crime. Basil McCrea said that good statistics mean good politics. I was not quite sure what he meant by that. However, if he meant that good statistics are a basis for formulating good law and good practices, I would agree with him.

Over the years, I have known, factually and anecdotally, of cases of domestic violence. I have never had anybody come into my constituency office to make that sort of complaint, and I would not expect that. However, of the cases that I have known about — of which there are quite a number — not one has been reported to the police. One case involved a lady who had a broken cheekbone and was badly bruised. She left her husband for six months but then went back to him. That says something about relationships. In a lot of cases, it is not the fear of retribution or of a repeat offence that prevents people from reporting domestic violence to the police, but the fear of social stigma. That is perhaps especially true in the upper echelons of society where domestic violence is every bit as prevalent as it is among the working class. There is a loyalty factor as well.

There are differences in the punishments for domestic violence and incidences of violence outside the home. Violence is violence and an assault is an assault. Both are crimes that have to be punished. However, it is hardly a surprise to me that, on some occasions, judges are more lenient in cases of domestic violence. If there was clear evidence of a wish for reconciliation, if a wife who had been violently assaulted spoke for her husband, if she made it clear that it was the first time, and he made it clear that it would be the last time, frankly, if I were a judge, I would take note of that.

Although the crime may be the same, perhaps there are occasions when the punishment is different.

It was, I think, Basil McCrea who said that there should perhaps be a slightly different legal process for those types of case. I do not have the answer; however, I wonder whether a different system — something a bit less formal and a bit less expensive — could be brought into play. Perhaps somebody has an idea about that. In all those cases, I wonder whether the full rigour of the law — in open court and in public — is really the way to go.

There is no statistic that I can find to indicate how many of the 23,000 cases reported each year led to a breakdown of the relationship. I suspect that the number of total relationship breakdowns is a small percentage of that figure. That makes me think that, in a lot of cases, the couple wants to maintain the relationship. I doubt whether we will ever see statistics for that. Perhaps a more conciliatory and arbitration-based approach might have some effect.

**Mr B McCrea:** I apologise for coming into the House towards the end of the Member's contribution.

He asked a specific question. There are 30,000 cases; 10,000 are criminal in the sense that they are proceeded with. Of those 10,000 cases, 7,000 are violent crimes. Although domestic violence is totally underreported, it still represents 25% of all violent crime. Those are huge figures. I agree with the Member that a different way of dealing with that must be found, but the figures are quite shocking.

2.15 pm

**Mr Lunn:** We still do not know how many of those cases lead to a total marriage or relationship breakdown.

The Alliance Party agrees with the motion, and the way in which it deplores violence. We totally agree that full access to refuge facilities is essential and that correct funding be provided for support groups and for any legal action. It is absolutely deplorable that a woman — I refer to women for simplicity — who is under such a threat of violence that she has to take her husband or partner to court does not receive legal aid for the prosecution yet he does for his defence. That is outrageous, and perhaps it is a case for a ministry of policing and justice to be devolved to Northern Ireland so that we can do something about it.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** Domestic violence and abuse is a serious problem and has a devastating impact on the lives of victims and their families. In Northern Ireland, it has reached disturbing levels. Statistics show that 11,000 children here live with domestic violence on a daily basis. Every year, six people, mostly women, are killed, and more than 700 families have to be re-housed as a result of violence in

the home. Every week, the police attend over 400 domestic violence incidents and deal with more than 100 domestic assaults on women and men. Recent statistics show that in 2007-08, 23,000 such incidents were reported to the police.

Victims are often reluctant to pursue a case through the courts because of concerns about the consequences of a prosecution and the impact that it might have on the family. Family members are reluctant to see a relative being sent to jail or to see the break-up of a family.

Such violent abuse affects people across society from all walks of life. Trevor Lunn spoke of working-class families, but the problem goes right across society. The vast majority of victims are women, but a number are men.

Violence in the home also has a particular impact on the development of children, who are very much the silent victims. The long-term effects on children who suffer or witness domestic violence can lead to significant problems. Juvenile crime, poor educational achievement, substance misuse, mental-health problems and homelessness are just some of the consequences for child victims of violence in the home.

The economic impact is quite staggering. About £180 million each year is the cost of domestic violence in Northern Ireland when the cost of services such as police, courts, health and social services and the loss of economic output is counted.

The cross-departmental strategy for addressing domestic violence in Northern Ireland, *Tackling Violence at Home*, was launched in 2005. The strategy aims to tackle domestic violence under the three key strands of prevention, protection, and justice and support. It is helping all the voluntary and statutory agencies to develop a consistent and long-term approach to the prevention of domestic violence and to produce an effective response where it is needed.

Action plans have been produced, and a regional steering group has been established to ensure that the plans are implemented rapidly and effectively. Five local domestic violence partnerships support people at a community level and bring together local groups and Government to help to tackle this scourge. The police and justice agencies, along with the Social Security Agency and housing agencies, have a responsibility to ensure that victims and their families get the necessary protection, financial help and accommodation.

The motion:

“calls on the Executive to bring forward proposals to ensure full access to refuge for persons affected”.

It is certainly my intention that appropriate support services and refuges are available for victims of domestic violence. The Department for Social Development's (DSD) Supporting People initiative, through the

Housing Executive, has played a crucial part in the provision of emergency refuge and temporary accommodation for those who suffer domestic violence. It also helps the voluntary sector to provide a range of other services to victims.

Ensuring that victims have a safe place to go when they are affected by violence is crucial. There are currently 17 women's refuges and move-on schemes that provide 148 family and single accommodation units for victims and children who have fled domestic violence. They are supported by DSD with funding of just over £3 million each year. In addition, £1 million is allocated through Supporting People to floating support services — an important support mechanism for women and their families who do not live in refuges.

There is absolutely no doubt that refuges are needed for victims of violence who are forced to flee violent homes. They are safe havens that are free from harm and abuse, where families can rebuild their lives and make decisions about their future. Why, though, should families and children who have endured domestic violence face even greater distress by being forced to leave their home? It is the violent abuser who should leave. Children must be given every opportunity to remain in the familiar surroundings of their home and to stay in their local school with their friends.

Greater protection and support is now available for families who wish to stay at home. Changes have been made to the law and to improve enforcement of non-molestation, occupation and restraining orders. Those are aimed at helping families to remain and feel safe in their own homes. Last year, the Housing Executive piloted a sanctuary scheme, which provides a room where a victim and her children can be safe in their own home. The scheme is now being extended across Northern Ireland.

The Housing Executive and registered social landlords can now repossess properties from tenants whose co-habitants have been driven out by domestic violence or threats of violence. That could help victims to return to their family home. I want that protection to be strengthened, so that more and more families are able to remain safely in their homes.

To achieve that would be a major challenge for Government. We must face up to that challenge if we are to tackle the problem of domestic violence in our society. With funding from my Department, the Northern Ireland Office and the Housing Executive, the Women's Aid Federation operates a 24-hour free-phone service, which is open to anyone who is affected by domestic violence. That helpline provides vital support and advice for victims of violence. In 2007-08, more than 24,000 calls were received.

Under the protection and justice strand of the strategy, there have been a number of developments in

support of victims. Police have greater powers of arrest for domestic violence. In addition, there are increased penalties for breach of protection orders. Work is being undertaken by the Legal Services Commission as part of its reform programme to examine how access to justice for victims of domestic violence can be improved.

On the prevention front, we must get the message across to everyone that domestic violence is never acceptable. Public-information campaigns, using television, radio and poster advertisements, have focused on encouraging those who are suffering violence and abuse to end their silence. The current campaign focuses on perpetrators of domestic violence, making it clear that they are committing a crime and that they can be prosecuted, even if the victim is too scared to testify or give evidence.

When I addressed the House in May 2007, I undertook to raise the profile of domestic violence and to secure the commitment of ministerial colleagues to give the issue the priority that it deserves. I have done that by setting up an inter-ministerial group on domestic and sexual violence, which held its first meeting last year. Its next meeting is planned for 6 May 2009. The group aims to provide local leadership and to ensure joint working across Government to tackle domestic violence.

I also gave a commitment to secure extra money to support victims, and was successful in getting an extra £200,000 per annum. That funding is being used to deliver educational programmes for children and young people, and counselling for victims. Research shows that 30% of domestic violence starts during pregnancy. Abused women have higher rates of miscarriage, stillbirths, premature labours and injuries to the foetus.

In 2006, my Department introduced a policy to ensure that expectant mothers are asked about domestic violence when they attend routine antenatal clinics. Work is ongoing to extend that provision to victims through A&E units and doctors' surgeries.

The strategy and its associated plans are facilitating many other initiatives. Barnardo's delivers awareness training and mentoring for Health Service staff, and the Men's Advisory Project provides counselling and anger-management services. By the end of March, approximately 1,200 sessions will have been delivered. Moreover, the NSPCC delivers support services for children who suffer domestic violence, and approximately 1,600 support sessions will have been delivered to mothers and their children by the end of March.

Furthermore, Women's Aid offers education programmes to schoolchildren to teach them about healthy, non-violent relationships. In 2007-08, more than 7,200 children took part in those programmes. Guidance was distributed to MLAs and MPs to help them to better identify victims of domestic violence and provide information on the available support

services. Staff from the Court Service and the Public Prosecution Service have received special training in order to make that process less intimidating for victims of domestic violence.

I have provided funding for the roll-out of the multi-agency risk assessment conference in Northern Ireland. That proven process will help to identify victims of domestic violence who are at greatest risk of harm and will establish a plan to ensure their safety. Nine staff will be involved in that process at a cost of £300,000 a year. That is jointly funded by the Department and the Northern Ireland Office. Those staff will be located in police public-protection units and will work with social workers, probation officers and others in order to identify and support high-risk victims.

I have included two targets that relate to domestic violence in the Department's priorities for action for 2010 and have ensured that domestic violence targets are included in the Northern Ireland policing plan. I wrote to Paul Goggins some time ago and he responded by assuring me that he would include those targets in the policing plan. Although Michelle McIlveen said earlier that such targets are not in the plan, Basil McCrea confirmed that they are included in the policing plan for 2009-2012, which will be published soon.

Jennifer McCann mentioned legal aid. That is matter for the Northern Ireland Office and the Court Service. However, the Legal Services Commission is revisiting that matter. Mervyn Storey asked whether GP practices keep a record of the gender of victims who visit them with complaints of domestic violence. GPs do not keep specific statistics on domestic violence disclosures, because victims do not tend to go to GPs about incidents of domestic violence.

I have previously discussed the pilot integrated family court scheme. Under the current domestic violence action plan, the Northern Ireland Court Service is taking the lead on that matter and will introduce proposals for a pilot integrated family court. Such schemes work successfully in England and ensure that victims do not have to continually return to court for court orders or for applications for custody or exclusions. That is an important issue that goes to the heart of where we need to be.

Although it is difficult for the authorities to protect families inside their own homes, we need to strive to do so. As Members have said repeatedly, violent attacks in the home must be treated in the same way as those that happen outside the home. The success of that idea will depend on good policing and equipping the police and the Court Service to support victims. Family courts offer a real opportunity for progress and could ensure that perpetrators receive the punishment that they deserve. That is an important way forward.

We have made progress on domestic violence. Nowadays, no one suggests that domestic violence should be kept within the home and that the authorities should not become involved in domestic disputes between husbands and wives. About 10 or 20 years ago, such garden wisdom was common. Everyone in society now understands that it is totally unacceptable and that the authorities will continue to reinforce the existing remedies.

Working together, we must make domestic violence absolutely unacceptable and ensure that appropriate resources are in place to provide support for victims.

2.30 pm

Those who suffer domestic violence must be encouraged to seek the help that they need and end the silence. We all have a part to play in achieving that.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members who contributed to this important debate. I have just carried out a rough count, and I think that 19 Members made a contribution to the debate, either through making a speech or by interventions.

I thank the Minister for being here and welcome what he said about how to address the issue and about raising its profile. I will first make a few points of my own, and then I will refer to other Members' contributions; each and every contribution from Members today was exceptionally valuable.

Members referred to the key findings of the Northern Ireland crime survey for 2007-08, but they are worth repeating: one in 10 respondents was a victim of domestic violence; respondents from a Protestant background were more likely to report than respondents from a Catholic background; some 27% of victims believed that their worst incident had been seen and/or heard by children; and 42% of respondents perceived that the Government and their agencies, such as the police and the courts, were doing too little to address the problem of domestic violence.

I have selected those particular key findings because, having listened to the debate, I think that they underpin the contributions of Members — not entirely, but they encompass the thrust of the contributions that were made.

**Mr I McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs McGill:** I am reluctant to take interventions, because I am going to comment on what each Member said. If there is time after I have made all my own points, I will give way.

My colleague Jennifer McCann, who opened the debate, provided a stark statistic on which a number of Members commented. One quarter of all women experience domestic violence in their lives; that is a frightening statistic. A second statistic referred to by

Jennifer McCann is that 11,000 children have experienced domestic violence; most Members referred to that statistic. That is important, and I will repeat it: 11,000 children have experienced domestic abuse.

It is difficult to comprehend the implications of that, which include problems at school. Research shows that experiencing violence at home has damaging and devastating effects on children at school and in later life. We heard from Members that that is a problem; if someone experiences domestic violence in early life, it tends to be repeated in adult life.

Ian McCrea commended Women's Aid, as did other Members. He gave a graphic account of a case in his constituency, and referred to the good work that was done by Women's Aid in Cookstown. He said that the woman involved in that case had no house for herself and her children and that the children ended up in care. That is a serious situation, but the Minister spoke about how the housing situation might be resolved.

John McCallister used the phrase "blight on our society", with which I agree. He spoke about the PSNI having to respond to incidents of domestic violence every 23 minutes, and he also made reference to the Northern Ireland Office and the Health Department working together.

He also talked about the difficulties that pregnant women in these situations face. We do not need to go into details, but it is horrifying to think about pregnant women and their unborn children being abused.

Carmel Hanna has worked with victims of domestic abuse and has first-hand knowledge of the problem. She talked about the children, and she asked why abusers do what they do. She said that this was a challenge, and I concur with that. I do not believe that we understand fully the reason that domestic violence happens.

Naomi Long began her contribution by saying that this was a very important issue. We all agree with that, and as I have said repeatedly, the contributions from Members underline that. She highlighted the fact that domestic abuse takes place behind closed doors, and she drew attention to the silence that surrounds it. That paints a particular picture that must be addressed.

Several Members, including Mrs Long, talked about sentencing and said that it was in no way encouraging. It is not encouraging; the evidence and the experience to show that are there. Who is actually being sentenced? We must recognise that, very often, the initial victim, and not the perpetrator, is sentenced. The Minister said that attempts were being made to address that situation. Members of the Policing Board also addressed that issue.

Lord Morrow made particular reference to one key finding in statistics when he talked about the difference in numbers between Catholics and Protestants reporting domestic violence to the PSNI. He said that the statistics

pointed in a particular direction. I selected that key finding myself, and there are many reasons that the statistics show that there is a higher rate of reporting of domestic violence from the Protestant community. I reassure Lord Morrow that we are all trying to build confidence. We are trying to build confidence in my side of the community so that people can feel that they can go to the PSNI. As elected Members, we encourage them to do that.

Lord Morrow used the word “battered” when he talked about victims of domestic violence. Again, that was very graphic and very telling. He wondered why, if the violence happens in the home, it is treated one way by the judiciary and sentenced accordingly, but if it happens in the street, it is dealt with differently. The Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea also talked about building confidence, and he supported Lord Morrow’s comments. As a member of the Policing Board, Basil McCrea is able to raise the issues in the place where they should be dealt with properly.

Michelle McIlveen talked about the problem from a different angle, and she focused her contribution on what must be done about perpetrators. She made a valuable point, and she mentioned a case in my constituency and what flowed from it. She said that perpetrators often remain in the situation where they can continue to harm. I am not sure that that is being addressed fully. I know that some measures have been put in place as a result of that case in my constituency, and we must ensure that such work continues.

Mary Bradley talked about the figures in Foyle and about the price of a non-molestation order. She has experience of that in her constituency, and we can all relate to that. Jim Shannon talked about the one in four women who have been the victims of domestic abuse, and he related many of those cases to problems with alcohol. He supported the funding for Women’s Aid and its work. Dr McDonnell described the motion as valuable. He emphasised the work of Women’s Aid and reiterated the fact that 11,000 children are affected by domestic abuse.

Trevor Lunn also mentioned the statistics on reporting instances of domestic abuse to the police. That issue is being addressed slowly. He wondered about legal aid, and the Minister referred to that.

Minister McGimpsey spoke about how devastating domestic abuse is for communities and families. Certainly, this issue is a challenge for all of the bodies. My party tabled this motion, and we very much welcome, and are pleased with, today’s contributions. We all are saying the same kinds of things —

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

**Mrs McGill:** The challenge in dealing with the issue remains. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly deplores any instance of domestic violence and its implications for children, young people and vulnerable adults; calls on the Executive to bring forward proposals to ensure full access to refuge for persons affected and to address the issue of access to legal aid for vulnerable families; and further calls for adequate funding for the relevant support groups and community organisations in their campaigns and work in tackling domestic violence.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### All-Party Assembly Group on Autism

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

**Mr D Bradley:** I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the high rate of autism and the consequent development challenges to Government and non-Government agencies across health, education and social care; and commends the United Nations designation of 2 April as world autism awareness day and the invitation to all Member States to observe this day annually to raise public awareness of autism.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an rún áirithe seo a mholadh. On behalf of the all-party Assembly group on autism, I am pleased to propose today's motion.

There is no doubt that autism is being recognised as a global human rights issue. The United Nations designation, which is referenced in the motion, places autism in a group of issues that requires a united push to break down the barriers that have been created by years of neglect and inequality in each member state.

For example, in Northern Ireland, since 2002, we have witnessed prevalence rates of autism rise from four in 10,000 to 71 in 10,000 and further, to one in 100. That equals 20,000 people locally with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), and, if one counts their families, the lives of 68,000 people are touched day and daily by autism. That is a huge number of people.

The increase in autism among the school-age population from 900 to 4,000 cases among children and young people reflects a staggering 400% rise in only six years. That is due to the systemic lack of investment and cannot be explained solely by improved identification. Autism is recognised globally as the fastest rising disability, and research indicates that unmet need is causing the highest rates of mental stress in the disability sector.

Despite that evidence — and the obvious pressure and challenges that are faced by those families and providers, hundreds of whom gathered outside this Building today — services, policies, legislation and awareness have remained underfunded, underdeveloped and under-researched at Government level.

In commending the motion, I call on the Executive to take forward the first Northern Ireland ASD awareness campaign in direct response to the sentiments expressed in today's motion and the United Nations requirement for autism awareness.

I think that this is the fourth Northern Ireland Assembly debate on the issue since 2002, and I think that it is the second or third such debate in which I have spoken. Yet none of the measures — universal ASD screening, services for adults with autism and autism legislation — that was supported unanimously in the Chamber has been put in place by the Departments concerned.

That is in spite of an unusually active parent disability lobby, which, as I said, we saw outside Parliament Buildings today. That lobby should have enabled us to transcend the barrier of shame into action long ago. The lobby is led by parents and people with autism. As I said, they brought the issue up to the steps of Stormont today and into the Chamber.

2.45 pm

I commend the genuine commitment of, and work undertaken by, the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety with regard to long overdue policy and service initiatives for autism. The Department of Education's task group on autism, supplemented by a range of policy documents, has created initiatives, such as a regional ASD psychology and advisory service and the Middletown Centre for Autism.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — and I am pleased to see the Minister here, and I welcome him — has just completed its consultation on an action plan for autism, the aim of which is to address gaps in the early-years provision by establishing a care pathway and removing the IQ barrier to service for individuals with Asperger's syndrome. Significantly, autism has pioneered a major shift within the Department's programme of care structures by establishing a new cross-cutting programme of care. Yet, it still appears that we are light years away from the initiative being appreciated and generalised across all Departments.

Our Departments appear to lag behind the voluntary sector, which has pioneered ASD provision within a regional and partnership perspective. It is therefore my view, and the view of the all-party group, that it is imperative that the Assembly stands up for autism, seizes the initiative and brings forward a legislative directive that creates a mechanism to ensure several outcomes.

First, it must ensure that autism is recognised and provided for in a co-ordinated manner as a social and communication disability that uniquely cuts across the remits of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), Department for Social Development (DSD), Department for Regional Development (DRD) and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL).

Secondly, it must ensure that an autism advocate is appointed for families and individuals with ASD to undertake specific responsibilities, such as improving access to existing services to a review of outdated disability legislation, addressing “entitlement to services” issues for families and supporting families to access existing human rights and equality provisions, which are currently reporting an under-representation of cases with ASD.

Thirdly, it must ensure a regional autism strategy that crosses key Departments, involves the voluntary sector and encompasses all previous ASD policy initiatives while addressing the specific challenge of support services for life transitions into adulthood and incorporating a regional training strategy.

In proposing to introduce the autism Bill (NI) shortly, which is a legislative response to the challenge of ASD, the all-party Assembly group on autism has been informed by an independent report entitled ‘Improving Services for People with ASD’, which was produced by the Assembly Research and Library Service and published in 2008.

That report reviewed the existing legislation, policy and practice in Northern Ireland. It viewed the significance of the isolated departmental actions on autism as a stepping stone towards legislation and not as an end in themselves in view of the need to secure accurate and agreed data on the number of individuals with autism to inform and map cross-departmental planning and funding; address the gaps in existing legislation to counter discrimination — the report also confirmed the barriers in access to services; and required Government to act for autism to counteract the existing piecemeal accumulation of ASD policies that focused on individual Departments.

Within the United Kingdom and Ireland, it is time for the Northern Ireland Assembly to decide whether or not it wants to lead or follow. It is time for the Northern Ireland Assembly to stand up for autism. The Welsh Government have agreed a cross-cutting regional response that fits Wales.

In England, the Autism Bill has had its successful Second Reading, and in Scotland, a national cross-cutting strategy is being considered. Each jurisdiction must devise a response that is unique to its situation. We can look to Wales for an example of a managed, accountable ASD service infrastructure across all Departments; to Denmark for a national plan; to Sweden for legislation on the entitlement to services from Government; and to other jurisdictions as well. We can learn from the practice of other nations.

Members of the all-party Assembly group on autism ask for the support of the Chamber once again, and for the support of the disability community, in particular, as the Bill is progressed. The Bill will bring a measure

of recognition and equality to autism, which will raise the profile of the whole disability sector generally. It is not about taking anything away from anyone — it is about opening the door to a disability that has been denied access because the strategies and learning techniques required have been alien to our existing structures.

Children, young people and adults with autism, as well as the families who live with them, have lobbied us hard over the past seven years. Autism advocacy groups have been building a bridge for political action so that change will happen, in our lifetime, for future generations. As the last span of that bridge is put in place, let us make sure that we also put in place the piece that is needed to meet their requirements.

**Mr Craig:** I want to deal with the issue of why legislation on autism is needed here. Existing legislation does not mention ASD, and some people say that that leaves a lot of flexibility, and that the legislation is not prescriptive: in other words, by not ruling something in, you are not ruling anything else out.

However, generic provision has never worked for ASD. Generic services do not work for people with ASD — they need specialist ASD intervention. They also need clarity and structure in the intervention required for them. What works for everyone else does not work for ASD sufferers. ASD sufferers currently get such provision from specific charities. It is solely from those charities — who provide services and policies — that we have seen progress on autism.

People with ASD learn differently due to the nature of their impairment. Unique teaching strategies and training are required for those people. As a society, we need to put those in place. I have touched on the generic nature of our existing legislation, but even within that, there are sub-categories which are more detailed: for example, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 is weighted heavily towards physical disability — it can be done.

Special needs services are required across the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development and the Department for Employment and Learning. That those Departments need to work together shows the need for legislation: how else can we bring them together and make them work for the benefit of ASD sufferers?

Legislation is about giving parents official recognition, after 18 years of lobbying against denial by services and Departments, that the disability actually exists as a distinct and unique disability. It does not have to co-exist with other learning disabilities. It is unique. Legislation brings with it the imperative for action.

Legislation is essential in order to require public bodies to, for instance, improve access to services and facilities for people with ASD. Legislation is needed to establish foundations, principles and guidance for a

cross-cutting regional strategy for all Northern Ireland Departments. The key obstacles to progress on ASD are lack of regional cross-departmental strategy and funding.

Each Department prefers to produce its own action plan: in 2008, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety brought out its action plan; the Department of Education produced an action plan in 2009; and there are three health and social care strategies. There is no joined-up thinking about ASD sufferers.

This legislation is needed because it requires all Departments to work together strategically, rather than pay lip service to policy collaboration. Legislation is critical because current legislative recourse is having a negative impact on families, who are left in a catch-22 situation. If there is no official recognition of ASD against which to judge cases, families usually end up giving up before going to court. Many cases fail, and confusion is allowed to continue.

Legislation should recognise autism as a social and communication disability, with a range of co-morbid conditions that necessitate a unique degree of access across education, learning-disability, mental-health and sensory-disability services. Legislation should require the appointment of an ASD co-ordinator to act as an advocate for individuals with ASD and for their families.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Craig:** I certainly will, Mr Deputy Speaker. That co-ordinator will monitor and develop a cross-departmental strategy and make amendments to existing legislation. With that in mind, I support the motion.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I support the motion.

At the outset, I commend the Minister of Education for the report of the task group on autism and for the establishment and support in Middletown — in my constituency — of the all-Ireland centre of excellence for the education of children and young people with autism. In advance, I also commend the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the forthcoming autism action plan.

Those are significant, positive milestones on the journey to address a need that is not being met. The challenge for us all is that autistic spectrum disorder does not fit neatly into one compartment. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is to be commended for considering a new, cross-cutting programme of care to include ASD.

Other Departments such as DEL, DSD and DCAL must also buy in and provide services to ASD sufferers and their families. An autism Bill is the mechanism by which to combine all responsible Departments. The

Bill would establish a regional training strategy to be co-ordinated by the voluntary sector, as happens in Scotland. Specialist training of psychology, psychiatry and paediatrics staff is essential — indeed, critical — in order to achieve an accurate service system.

The North of Ireland has the highest rate of staff training in diagnostic interview for social and communication disorder, autism diagnostic observation schedule and autism diagnostic interview — the main specialist training assessment tools required for ASD diagnosis. That is because Autism NI brought that training to the North in 1986, in partnership with local paediatricians.

There is also an autism diagnosticians forum, which, although independent, began as an Autism NI special-interest group. The only similar forum in existence is in Western Australia. Unlike other disabilities, autism has been subject to reliable diagnosis since only 2000. That is why the training of health visitors in detecting ASD must be more strategic and less piecemeal than current arrangements.

3.00 pm

As far as we are aware, there have been only two health visitors who specialise in detecting ASD employed in the North on temporary contracts. Could those in the voluntary sector with relevant expertise be utilised to supplement that provision with additional quality services?

There is a major concern about the length of time it takes for assessment and diagnosis. Current waiting times range from six months to two years, which is due to a failure to prioritise and manage a co-ordinated approach to ASD rather than a lack of funding. The first spend on ASD by the Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety was part of its Priorities for Action 2003-04 and targeted that area. Further funding has since been received.

The Department's action plan and Priorities for Action 2009-2010 imposed a target of 13 weeks on waiting lists, in line with other health issues. However, it is difficult to adhere to that time frame when it comes to ASD, and a concern exists that the opportunity to make an accurate assessment may be lost to the pressures involved in trying to meet the deadline.

An autism Bill would encompass the Department's action plan and Priorities for Action targets. Those would be supported by the long-term regional ASD training strategy and a mechanism for a co-ordinated, consistent, strategic service development for ASD. The Bill also addresses the issue of adult diagnosis by establishing a cross-departmental requirement to plan strategic service development with joint financing arrangements. That would mean that joint diagnostic protocols, such as assessment and treatment, could be applied to all individuals. Whether an individual was

identified in education or through the criminal justice system, the same protocols would be applied as a right rather than a coincidence.

In the absence of at-home expertise, the Bill provides access to the regional ASD advocate for an expert diagnosis of complex cases out of state. That would facilitate an easy assessment of high cost, low-incidence services for ASD to assist with service development.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

**Mr Boylan:** I will, sir.

The Bill could result in the implementation of the guidelines set by the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines on autism. Furthermore, early intervention is the critical next step and must be integrated into any proposed diagnostic service. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr McCallister:** I thank my colleagues for helping to secure today's important debate. Many Assembly debates are self-serving and party political, but this one addresses an issue that cuts across our entire society, and we must work collectively to make the necessary changes in service provision. Only cross-departmental working and raising community awareness will improve the lives of the thousands of people who suffer from autistic spectrum disorder in Northern Ireland.

Autism is a particularly challenging learning disability with social and behavioural implications that require support throughout an individual's life. However, autism and autistic spectrum disorders do not receive the necessary recognition, nor do those who suffer from it receive the full range of support they require. The National Autistic Society Northern Ireland, in conjunction with Autism NI, does great work in providing support and raising awareness. The society suggests that more than 17,000 people in Northern Ireland have autism. If their families are included in the figures, more than 68,000 people in this small Province are affected by autism.

However, the society also estimates that more than 90% of people do not know how common autism is. In addition, 55% of people who have heard of autism think that it affects only children. Autistic spectrum disorder has no physical attributes, which often leads to people suffering in silence. Also, people can be misunderstood, misdiagnosed and shunned, which can lead to further isolation. Today's debate is, therefore, crucial in raising community awareness of the problems associated with autism.

I commend the United Nations for designating 2 April as world autism awareness day, and I welcome the fact that that has initiated today's debate.

It is crucial that, throughout their lives, people get the support that they need. That means that people who live with ASD — and their families — need prompt assessment, diagnosis, treatment and support. That support must be available as those children grow up and go through their education and further learning into adulthood. Therefore, it is crucial that Executive Departments provide integrated services, but that must take place most explicitly between the Department of Health, the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department for Social Development and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

**Mrs Long:** The Member referred to the fact that people see autism as a childhood disease. Does he agree that it is particularly important that adults who are living with autism have better access to diagnostic services so that they can take the first steps in finding their way to get the proper support that they need in order to be able to live their lives to the full?

**Mr McCallister:** I thank the Member for that useful intervention, and I agree wholeheartedly. That is critical. There are many other issues to factor in, but access to diagnostic services, as well as support throughout their lives, is critical. That is why so many Departments need to be involved as those people progress through their lives. We have made progress in recent years, but there is still more work to be done.

I congratulate and thank the Minister of Health for launching the autistic spectrum disorder strategic action plan, which hopefully, will be implemented very shortly. The Minister's proposals are influenced heavily by the excellent work of the independent review of autism services, which was chaired by Lord Maginnis. The review is designed to standardise assessment, diagnosis, treatment and support across all health trusts. The proposed regional ASD group will co-ordinate services and promote the early identification of developmental delay in children and early signs of autism. That is a much-needed change, as some families and children are waiting for up to three years to get a diagnosis, which means that they cannot get specialist educational assistance and get on to a lifetime pathway of support.

There have been calls for new legislation on autism, but the independent review highlighted categorically that it is not needed. We need to focus on the implementation of existing strategies, not on further unnecessary bureaucracy.

It would be remiss of me not to address a debate on autism without raising the serious reservations that I have about the appropriateness or potential effectiveness of the Department of Education's proposed Middletown centre of excellence for autism.

That centre will be neither central nor excellent. It is my firm belief that the project is a white elephant that

will serve a few at the expense of the majority of sufferers, and it may not even be appropriate for those who are lucky enough to gain a place in it. There are serious reservations about the medical provisions that are available to autistic children in the area and about how the centre will provide excellence in assessment, research, training and learning support in such an isolated location. How will parents, let alone specialists who are stationed in population centres, assess and be attracted to the proposed facility? There appears to have been no forward planning in the choice of the site for the centre of autism.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to please draw his remarks to a close.

**Mr McCallister:** We have been left with a potential drain on much-needed resources.

I support the motion.

**Mr McCarthy:** On behalf of the Alliance Party, the all-party Assembly group on autism, and the United Community group, I support this important motion fully.

I was extremely proud and humbled to be part of the Stand up for Autism rally outside Parliament Buildings earlier today and to be standing shoulder to shoulder with people who are at the coalface and who know exactly what is required. The Assembly must lead from the front, and all Departments must give priority to providing the necessary support to everyone with autism, both young and old.

It is a sad fact that the number of people with autism is increasing, and it is incumbent on all of us, particularly those who are in Government, to act accordingly.

I pay tribute to organisations such as Autism Northern Ireland, the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland, and other organisations and individuals at the forefront of providing support and counsel to people with autism and their families. So much progress is being made on a worldwide basis, and we are part of that progress. Some of us recently visited the US, a trip that culminated in the signing of a memorandum of understanding on Capitol Hill. Of course, we are all working together locally in the Celtic Nations Autism Partnership to make things better.

It is now time for action to be taken across all Departments in Northern Ireland; there can be no more excuses. People on the ground with experience of the needs of those with autism know what is required.

As indicated by Dominic Bradley, the chairperson of the all-party group, the Assembly must now support the autism Bill and put the legal framework into operation as soon as possible. That Bill will ensure that people with autism get the right access to services in areas such as health, social care, education, employment and so on. Although I am glad that the Minister of Health is here today, autism is not his sole responsibility; the

other Ministers in the Executive have a responsibility to get their teeth into this and to get on with it.

The Bill should recommend that an autism co-ordinator be appointed to ensure cross-departmental service development, and it should also contain a strategy to link all Departments together. Furthermore, it should provide trusts with suitably qualified and trained professional staff, and make provision for support and information for those with autism. Critical to all of that must be a ring-fencing of funding to deliver the ASD strategy.

In May 2008, the independent review of autism services, chaired by Lord Maginnis, produced an extremely detailed report with a number of crucial recommendations. Those recommendations must be adopted and worked on to provide the best — and nothing but the best — services, now and in the future, for those with autism.

I recently received some correspondence from the parents of a youngster, pleading for proper planning for young adults with autism. Funding should be made available for support, including learning and useful stimulation, and the desire to care for youngsters in a family setting. Those are fairly basic requests, and the Assembly must surely do what it can to support that youngster and their family. Indeed, that request could be repeated over and over again throughout Northern Ireland. If the Assembly is to mean anything at all, it must listen to the cries of ordinary people. We cannot let those people down; let us bring ASD to the top of our agenda.

Thursday 2 April marks world autism day. That day has been adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, and we are delighted to be part of it. This Thursday will see autism organisations across the globe call on their Governments for the help that is the entitlement of all people with autism.

I plead with the Assembly, and more importantly with our Executive, to stand up for autism as we have done today. Those with autism need, deserve and must have the same opportunities as everyone else in our society, from birth right through life's journey. Remember, children with autism grow into adults with autism —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member please bring his remarks to a close?

**Mr McCarthy:** It is our duty to support those with autism all the way. I support the motion.

**Mr I McCrea:** Like all the other Members who have spoken in the debate today, I support the motion. I put on record my appreciation to Arlene Cassidy from Autism NI and the former Speaker of the Assembly, Eileen Bell, who has worked tirelessly alongside staff to provide the secretariat services for the all-party Assembly group on autism. I also want to

mention the National Autistic Society, which also carries out very sterling work. However, and more importantly, it would be remiss of me not to mention the parents and family members of those who suffer from ASD.

I wish to deal with early or rapid intervention. Early intervention gives meaning, moral justification and substance to the diagnostic label of autism. Without it, diagnosis is a cold instrument of truth. Early intervention has been led by the voluntary sector. Some commentators say that there is an over-diagnosis of autism in Northern Ireland and that there is no need to label individuals as autistic, because that prevents inclusion. Data on autism is poor, and parents seek a diagnosis to give them direction and support, which is not available in our society.

3.15 pm

One might ask from where those commentators get their evidence? Worldwide research on early intervention across the disability community proves its cost-effectiveness, and research in the field of ASD has confirmed that to be the case here as well.

Early intervention in ASD is a specialist area, and it is difficult to access in many parts of Northern Ireland. Therefore, a diagnosis is often the gateway to that provision. Early-intervention strategies for ASD are good models of practice for all people. An effective assessment and diagnostic process will inform the content of early or rapid intervention, which is based on individual need. Rapid intervention is rare, due to the lack of adult diagnostic services and patchy treatment services.

The current process of diagnosis is too slow. A child might not see a specialist for 18 months or two years — if they are lucky — after his or her parent has brought him or her to the GP, during which time the child could have been in an appropriate behaviour programme.

Some infants who are suspected of having autism reach school age before they see a specialist. That cannot be allowed to continue. Early and rapid intervention is essential to ensure that the child is placed in a programme and receives the best level of care.

The role of the voluntary sector in providing a voice for the needs of parents is vital. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety action plan has failed to give the voluntary sector a strategic integrated role. Only an autism Bill (Northern Ireland) will be able to provide that advocate for parents and strategic planning for an integrated role for the voluntary sector.

The keyhole jigsaw of early intervention programme is proven but not applied comprehensively across Northern Ireland. That programme has been the subject of five research reports by the University of Ulster, and it has achieved international recognition. It is a product

of a unique partnership of voluntary and statutory agencies alongside parents in Northern Ireland. The keyhole jigsaw of early intervention programme includes a resource kit for families, pre diagnosis; a training programme for preschool playgroups; a training programme for parents; and a six-month home visit programme for the child.

Unfortunately, the programme does not have recurrent funding anywhere in Northern Ireland, although various boards and trusts have purchased or implemented parts of it. The programme design means that it must be a voluntary and statutory partnership. The content of the keyhole jigsaw of early intervention programme can be updated. Currently, it provides access to all ASD interventions and strategies.

There is a lack of co-ordinated action, and the problem with the current system is that it works against mainstreaming innovative practice. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety action plan is limited to children's services for the next three years, and the priorities for action for 2009 refer to the importance of early intervention and set 13-week targets for access to specialist treatment, but do not specify the existence of a pre-existing mechanism.

An autism Bill would provide for an autism advocate for parents and an integrated strategy that will facilitate quality programmes and rapid intervention treatments for adults. The absence of a co-ordinated regional response to early intervention has alienated families and encouraged them to become supporters of various separate strategies. There needs to be a mechanism for parents to access all appropriate interventions and intensive treatments within the keyhole jigsaw of early intervention programme. I support the motion.

**Mr Weir:** Unlike a number of the Members who have spoken in the debate, I am not a member of the all-party Assembly group on autism. I commend the motion that is before the House and welcome the fact that it is in the Order Paper. I wish to concentrate on one aspect, although I commend 90% of the remarks that have been made by Members who have spoken.

I take a degree of issue with what Mr McCallister said about there being no need for legislation; I believe that there is such a need.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** I will give way in a second or two.

I would also like to think that I would keep more of an open mind than he has about the Middletown centre for autism.

I am happy to give way to Mr Bradley.

**Mr D Bradley:** I thank the Member for giving way. Is the Member aware that over the past number of months, Mr McCallister has supported an autism Bill

faithfully and only last week offered to sign up his support for it? However, today he tells us that he is opposed to it.

**Mr Weir:** Mr McCallister will have to answer for himself on that point — one can only speculate as to his motivation if he has performed a U-turn on the matter, although we can probably use some guesswork in identifying that.

As I indicated, a lot of good points have been made in this debate. I want to concentrate on a matter that has been touched on by only a couple of the Members who have spoken but that is one that I consider to be equally valid. That is the problem of adults with autism. A good deal of attention has — rightly — been paid to the importance of having early intervention and enough protection for children with autism; however, in many ways, the issue of adults with autism sometimes becomes the Cinderella issue of the autism debate and can be ignored slightly.

In that respect, I commend the good work that the National Autistic Society has done to highlight that issue. That organisation has produced an excellent publication entitled 'I exist: The Message from Adults with Autism'. That document details the results of a survey that showed that, of the adults with autism who took part in the survey, 96% feel that with more support they would feel less isolated, 34% have experienced severe mental-health difficulties, and 57% suffer from depression.

There is a tendency to think of autism as purely a childhood issue, particularly because of the impact that it has on our education system. However, statistics show that one in 100 people suffer from some form of autism, which is a condition that affects people throughout their entire lives. As the National Autistic Society puts it, the challenge is to think differently, act positively and transform lives.

Although the National Autistic Society is doing good work with such things as its Help! programme, which provides degrees of support to families and carers, the level of support that exists in Northern Ireland for adults with autism is, at best, very patchy. Of the five trusts, one provides more or less permanent family support workers, two other trusts have funding for a family support worker who is provided simply on a one-year basis, therefore calling into question whether that provision will be renewed, and two others provide no support whatever.

As Mr Boylan indicated, in Northern Ireland there are now high levels of training in the diagnosis of autism in the children's sector. However, many adults with autism have gone undiagnosed for years, and it may be that their symptoms are only properly described when they are bringing a member of their family for diagnosis. We need to give the same level of support to

adult diagnosis. In relation to the literacy aspect, we need to ensure that there is proper provision in the learning disability budget for the full range of autism services and that a certain amount of money is autism specific.

As the National Autistic Society indicated, we must ensure that, when it is implemented, the ASD strategic action plan meets the needs of adults with autism. We need to ensure that the plan is fit for purpose and, to help us to do that, the National Autistic Society has identified six objectives that should be met.

First, the local trusts must record the number of adults with autism in their areas. I believe that, until now, there has been a weakness in that area. Secondly, there should be a named professional in each trust area who is responsible for diagnosing adults with autism. Thirdly, health and social care trusts should establish a clear route to enable adults with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism to access assessment and support. Fourthly, health professionals who are in regular contact with adults with autism must be trained properly. Fifthly, adults with autism and their families and carers should be involved in the development of services — we cannot simply have something imposed on people; we need to work with them. Finally, the new autism-spectrum services should be developed for adults, their families and their carers.

We need to give that support across the spectrum. Much good work has been done, but there is a good lot to be done. Obviously, it is an interdepartmental issue. However, in tackling the great problem of the provision for autism, we must ensure that, in providing the best of services, adults with autism are not simply ignored. I urge Members to support the motion.

**Mr Savage:** I declare an interest as secretary of the all-party Assembly group on autism, and I support the motion. However, I wish to speak about a number of matters that worry me greatly about how we deal with autism in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Education has gone out of her way to push for an autism facility at Middletown, which has the potential, dare I say it, to become a major North/South white elephant. Already, the Minister has spent more than £3.4 million of taxpayers' money on that facility, and yet not one child has benefited. Members have raised concerns about the facility with the Minister on numerous occasions. However, she has continually dismissed any points that have been raised.

I am concerned that a huge amount of resources will be wasted in bringing children out of their local, stable environment for a five-week period, unsettling them — which, as any parent of an autistic child would tell you, is not a good idea — and then, when the five weeks are over, pushing them back to their home environment.

We need a proper autism strategy in Northern Ireland — not legislation. Parents want to see delivery on the

ground, and that is where the help is needed. We need local services, delivered locally, with early identification, early assessment and diagnosis and, most importantly, early intervention.

Shortly after assuming office, my colleague, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, recognised that autism was a major issue. He was determined to take action and initiated the independent review of autism services, so that a clear strategy could be developed for future services. The independent review — chaired by Lord Maginnis, as my colleague has just said — made a number of clear recommendations, and it also had its own concerns about the facility at Middletown. The fact that an international panel of autism experts has misgivings about the centre, clearly leads one to conclude that that facility has not been considered properly.

The purchase of the Middletown site cost millions, refurbishing it will cost more millions, and yet, in the whole process, not one autism expert has been even consulted. At departmental level in the Department of Education, not one autism expert is employed to head up that and other projects affecting autistic children, and, in this day and age, that is just not on.

We need to invest our money in local services — not buildings detached from population centres. We must provide the parents of autistic children with the help and support that they need, properly funded, rather than trying to make a name for any particular organisation by trying to create an autism Bill that would not be worth the paper on which it was written.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member confirm whether he has signed a pledge of support for an autism Bill for Northern Ireland?

**Mr Savage:** We certainly support the bid for a new autism centre; however, we have information on the report on autism services in Northern Ireland.

I want to make a few comments regarding Autism NI. I readily acknowledge the wide range of work that that organisation undertakes and has been providing throughout the Health Service here for many years. However, I have a number of concerns about recent activities. I have received complaints from parents of autistic children who are dissatisfied with the direction that Autism NI has taken regarding legislation.

The reality is that, despite devoting much time, energy and money to that cause, a proposed autism Bill will not provide any assistance to parents where they need it most.

3.30 pm

It is most disturbing that Autism Northern Ireland has spent thousands of pounds courting Members of Parliament and Members of this House, yet parents across the country are crying out for help. I appeal to

Autism Northern Ireland to work with all shareholders to address the current need. As Lord Maginnis's —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, please. I am finding it difficult to hear the Member. Other Members should give the Member their attention.

**Mr Savage:** I will draw my remarks to a close. All that my party and I want is to ensure that the parents of autistic children in Northern Ireland receive all the help that they need.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome and support today's motion. It is clear that the all-party Assembly group on autism is standing up for autism by bringing forward the draft autism Bill on behalf of the parents, the carers and the health organisations that it represents. I was very disappointed that the Member who spoke previously said that thousands of pounds have been spent by an organisation in order to court Assembly Members. At some stage, that statement should be withdrawn, because it is unfair and incorrect. It impugns the character of so many people who work and care for people with autism.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Does the Member agree that the Member who spoke previously made those comments to deflect from the fact that his party does not stand up for people with autism?

**Mr P Ramsey:** That is the case. That party will have to defend its position, because it signed up for the proposals one day and withdrew its support the next.

The awareness of autism is increasing due to well-organised campaigns that are mounted by Autism Northern Ireland, which is a local charity that consists of parents, professionals, support groups, friends, acquaintances and constituents. Thankfully, people are becoming more aware of what autistic spectrum disorders are. That is to be appreciated, given that those disorders affect 20,000 people across Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, there is still a lack of understanding of autism, as it is a hidden and very diverse condition. However, there is scope for that understanding to improve. That is one of the reasons why Members feel that it is appropriate to bring forward an autism Bill for Northern Ireland.

The motion draws attention to the challenges of the health, educational and social care needs of people with autistic spectrum disorder. I will briefly address some of those needs in turn. In recent years, parents have become increasingly concerned about the inadequacy of services in Northern Ireland for individuals with autism and, in particular, Asperger's syndrome. It is generally thought that parents of autistic children are more likely to see their child's special health needs going unmet.

Many autistic children have additional physical and mental-health needs. Parents who care for autistic children face a significantly greater burden as they try

to deal with their emotional, developmental and behavioural problems. Many parents in that position have to cut back on the hours that they work, and single parents may have to quit their jobs altogether to look after their autistic children.

We currently face a range of problems with autism, such as the waiting lists for diagnosis of autism; the diagnostic process itself; intervention after diagnosis; day services; and respite — the list is by no means exhaustive. Although recommendations have been made about those issues, we need to see more action and improvements. The Health Service must enhance diagnostic assessment and early intervention services for children and young people. It is essential that medical professionals work in partnership to address the needs of individuals who suffer from autism.

As a number of Members have stated, older individuals with autism are falling through the system's cracks. That has huge implications for their development, life and social skills, and their mental health. That issue has been raised by mental-health organisations, parents and carers.

Autism and education is a hot topic for schools and parents in Northern Ireland and around the world as the occurrence of autism in children increases, unfortunately, very rapidly. Today, teachers have a much higher number of autistic children in their classrooms than was the case a decade ago. For that reason, it is very important that all children receive appropriate education and structured support. That support must be made available to help to maximise skills and to enable every child to achieve their full potential, not only in childhood, but in adulthood.

In May 2008, the independent review of autism services recommended that autism-awareness training should be part of teacher-training courses, and that is an important point. It is crucial that a teacher can address the ongoing and changing needs of the child growing up in the education system.

Autistic spectrum disorders are lifelong developmental disabilities. There is a mistaken belief that autism affects only children. Worryingly, people do not realise that difficulties continue into, and right through, adulthood. As a society, we should try our best to learn and understand what adult autism is all about, what it is like and the unfortunate circumstances that lead up to it. We must also find the best way to help and give comfort and support to adults with autism.

The National Autistic Society reported that 63% of adults with ASD say that they do not get enough support to meet their needs. That is another challenge for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I am delighted that he is present for today's debate. Many parents and carers do not get enough support from statutory agencies, and some have yet to

receive a carers' assessment. There is little guidance for professionals who carry out assessments, and, because of communication difficulties, it is not always easy to identify the needs of an adult with ASD.

The motion is timely and the SDLP supports it, and, more importantly, the autism Bill that I hope will be brought before this Chamber on behalf of parents in Northern Ireland.

**Lord Morrow:** At the outset, I apologise for not being present at the start of the debate, but I was chairing the Committee on Procedures.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this timely motion, which raises an important issue. It is imperative that the nature and expression of this disorder are further highlighted and, consequently, understood by society to ensure that sufferers are neither penalised nor marginalised during their lives as a result of collective ignorance about their condition and symptoms.

Autism and Asperger's syndrome are wide-ranging conditions with varying degrees of seriousness. Autism is known as a lifelong developmental disability, and sufferers share three main areas of difficulty that affect them in different ways. Those three social categories are communication, interaction and imagination — routine experiences that we take for granted day in and day out. However, for autism sufferers, those matters are not straightforward and can impact severely on their daily life and the daily lives of their families and carers. Thus, a specialist programme must be put in place to help sufferers to deal with daily living, while sensitively handling their specific needs.

The matter does not apply only to selective education, because when the school bell rings, the autistic child's difficulties do not immediately stop. As with most conditions, their needs are constant and continuous, but care and support levels have fallen far short of those provided for other learning disabilities.

Similarly, what of the teenage and adult sufferers of ASD? What sort of support is in place for their specific needs? The independent review of autism services recognised the lack of ASD services across Northern Ireland, particularly for older adolescents and adults. Consequently, the review team's main focus was to develop specialist ASD services, while emphasising the need to create more co-ordination and cohesion across the broad range of services that are required.

The team found that the main delay in progress and the lack of specific services came down to financial constraints. It is therefore essential that a pragmatic approach is adopted to ensure that the needs of ASD sufferers are seen as a priority, given that they have been somewhat short-changed in the past, possibly through a lack of pertinent knowledge. Thankfully, we are at last witnessing a change in that regard, and ASD is becoming a more widely known and understood condition.

However, I must admit that I was shocked by the figures for Northern Ireland, and I had not fully comprehended the extent of the issue.

Alongside educational service and care support, however, there needs to be a faster and more streamlined diagnosis for those who may be affected. In some areas, a child has had to wait for up to 26 months to be assessed. That is a long time for a parent coping with a young child with learning difficulties, and, surely, in our modern society, that is totally unacceptable and needs to be changed. I hope that the Minister will take a long, hard look at that situation.

In a statement last June, the Health Minister acknowledged the need to address the shortfall in ASD services in areas such as workforce, specialist assessment, early intervention, structured behavioural interventions and family support. I welcome the fact that the Minister is fully aware of the situation, and would hope that he plans to fast-track proposals for the implementation of the review team's recommendations.

I will conclude by paying tribute to parents, charities, carers, support groups and others who have championed this cause, and led to a serious rethink in relation to ASD and, indeed, at times —

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member join me in expressing his disappointment at the remarks made by Mr Savage in the Chamber earlier? Will he also join me in dissociating himself from those remarks, and in describing them as disgraceful and demanding that Mr Savage withdraws those remarks?

**Lord Morrow:** I have to say that I did not hear the remarks of Mr Savage, because Mr Savage was on his feet speaking when I came into the House. So, I cannot truthfully comment on what Mr Savage did or did not say. I understand that he did cause consternation among some Members around the House in whatever he said, but I must emphasise that I did not hear his comments.

Finally, I warmly congratulate all those who have, at times, ploughed a very lonely furrow when the condition of ASD was neglected and not appreciated or understood by many people. It is because of the campaigning and championing of the issue by many people that we are debating it in the House today. I trust that the Minister, and the rest of us, will be more appreciative and understanding of the subject.

**Mr Durkan:** Like others, I support the motion. Some important and positive points have been made in the debate. One of those has been the repeated emphasis of the need to recognise the number of adults with autism. In the past, a lot of our debates have, naturally and understandably, focused on children with autism, the need for diagnosis and services and the pressures faced by their families. However, the increasing

recognition of the needs and circumstances of adults with autism is a very positive development and is, in many ways, a credit to a lot of the organisations that have campaigned on the issue, including very strong campaigns such as the "I Exist" campaign, which I helped to launch here and in different aspects of which others, too, have been involved.

There is increasing awareness of autism at a certain public-policy level. The general public, too, maybe has an increased awareness of autism partly as a result of the campaigns that I have mentioned and partly through some media depictions of people at various points of autistic spectrum disorder. However, that in many ways leads to an assumption that there has been a comparable increase in the provision and development of services, resources and policy commitments to meet that wider public understanding. Many people assume that, because more people are being diagnosed, and because the statistics are becoming stronger, that, somehow, services are being topped up commensurately, and, clearly, that is not the case.

It is the case all too often that parents of children who have been diagnosed as autistic have to navigate their way through systems and negotiate between services as though they are the first to be in that situation.

It is an indictment of us all, and of the logic of the public-policy system, that that is still the case. There is better understanding and awareness, yet when the stage of diagnosis is reached — and we have heard much about the long wait to get to that — they find themselves still in a limbo.

3.45 pm

Parents have to do more and more research into the condition to find out different aspects for themselves. They have to surf between the various organisations and charities to gain more awareness and find out more information and greater detail about potential services. They find themselves pushed about from one service provider to another, and they hear phrases such as, "not quite fitting our budget", "we do not have a proposal yet" and "that is a good idea and we will work on something there".

That is why the all-party Assembly group on autism is such a useful instrument. It helps to bring together the different experiences and frustrations that Members encounter in their constituencies, and it provides a platform for the ideas of the various organisations which deal with those issues.

I welcome the Health Minister's presence at the debate and the commitments that he has made. We have a strategic action plan, and it is very welcome, even if some Members want it to contain more or believe that the plan does not go far enough. We might raise questions about the other Departments and ask whether they will play their part.

I also recognise the work of the independent review of autism services, chaired by Lord Maginnis. He has issues about the Middletown Centre for Autism, which he raised yesterday at the meeting of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. There is an argument that that centre is a prestige project that does not deal with everything. However, let us be clear: it is a positive and important commitment, and it plays a positive role. Just as one size does not fit all, one centre does not fit all. That centre is not an adequate response, and we need a much more articulate and guaranteed provision of services at all levels and in all localities.

That brings me to the point of a Bill. I am perturbed to hear Members pour cold water on the idea of a Bill. We have had positive commitments in the past: when the taskforce reported a number of years ago, very strong commitments were made by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education and yet we have not seen them fully put into practice. Only a Bill will give us that sort of guarantee. That is why I supported the private Member's Autism Bill for England and Wales in Westminster a few weeks ago: it creates an important precedent. If MPs vote that Bill through Westminster, there will be no argument against a similar Bill in this Assembly.

Why Members of this Assembly should argue against legislating on the issue I am at a loss to understand.

**Mr Storey:** I will speak first as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. The issue has been brought to our attention, and it is relevant to the Education Department.

I will set in context what the Committee has heard over the past two years. It has received various briefings from Autism NI, for example; a joint briefing with the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety; a meeting with the parents of children with ASD from Lisburn; and a meeting with Hugh Morgan, the implementation manager of the autistic spectrum disorder strategic action plan for Wales. The Committee's Deputy Chairperson represented the Committee on an Autism NI-organised Celtic Nations Autism Partnership visit to the US, where it met representatives of similar organisations in Washington in September 2007. The Committee is also scheduled to meet with Wendy Lawson, an advocate for people with autism, with Autism NI on 28 April.

In October last year, the Committee heard from the chief executive of the Middletown Centre for Autism and some of his senior colleagues. The Committee raised a number of concerns at that time and received detailed responses from the centre and the Department of Education. I will return to those when, in a few moments, I speak as a Member. One key issue raised was

the need for an overall strategy for autism in Northern Ireland. Previously, the Committee had heard from Hugh Morgan, on his role to oversee the implementation of the all-Wales autism strategy.

The Committee for Education received a comprehensive update, a briefing paper from the Department of Education, in September 2008, which included statistics on the prevalence of ASD and the educational provision —

**Dr W McCrea:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that although we have heard the statistics, which are very important, we need to always be very careful to remember that those statistics represent people? Behind every one of those people is a family that is, in many ways, at a loss to know what to do. Therefore, as legislators, we must ensure that everything is done to help those families through their time of crisis, and continuing crisis, in their family's development.

**Mr Storey:** I concur with the Member's comments. We always need to keep that focus when debating these issues and we cannot allow statistics to get in the way of reality. Children, young people and their families have huge issues to face as a result of dealing with ASD.

The issue of specific legislation was raised. I am happy to make available to Members the report that the Department of Education prepared for the Education Committee. It is worthwhile reading that report: it certainly gave the Committee a very informed perspective on legislation and other issues around ASD. One issue arising from that paper, and from other recent and very welcome initiatives that address the early diagnosis and assessment of children — including funding from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — is the need for a Northern Ireland strategy for autism. Time and again we keep coming back to that, and it is something that needs to be underscored by the debate.

There needs to be a cross-departmental strategy involving the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Department for Employment and Learning, and others, together with voluntary sector interests and the Middletown Centre for Autism. The template for that has been developed in Wales. It raises the question of whether we need a champion for autism. After today's debate, I certainly do not think that that champion will be Mr Savage. One Department must take the lead on that work, and I note that the Health Minister is due to respond to the debate.

Very briefly, I will talk about issues that the parent of two boys with Asperger's syndrome raised with me today. Knowing that this debate was coming up, she sent me a text message summarising the issues she deals with as the parent of two boys with Asperger's syndrome. Networking of services, early grief

counselling for parents of newly diagnosed children, and continued support services for teenagers who have ASD are all issues. The other issue was around education and support for carers. We need to remember the carers of, and the people involved in caring for, people with ASD.

In conclusion, there needs to be more training in recognising ASD, and it should be part of the professional training of all front line health and education professionals. All staff working with children and adults should be alert to the telltale signs of ASD. A clear referral route should be established, with key workers appointed to provide support to individuals and their families. I support the motion.

**Mr B Wilson:** As a member of the all-party group on autism, I support the motion. As the Members who spoke previously have pointed out, there have been a number of important and positive milestones on the journey towards meeting the needs of people with autism. I particularly welcome the fact that the Department of Health is considering a new cross-cutting programme of care that will include ASD. However, there is a long way to go to provide satisfactory services. What about the services provided by other Departments: DCAL, DEL, DSD and so on? We need a mechanism to join together all Departments and services for people with ASD and their families. That mechanism is the proposed autism Bill.

The Assembly research paper, 'Improving Services for People with ASD', must be given serious consideration, along with the response from the all-party group on autism.

Autism is a lifelong condition, and anyone with it needs support throughout his or her life. The needs of individuals with autism are wide-ranging. Autism is a neurological disability that requires specialist programmes that are supported by specific assessment tools, such as the diagnostic interview for social and communication disorders, the autism diagnostic observation schedule and the autistic diagnostic interview – revised.

Those types of intervention range across health and education and include behavioural treatments, education-based approaches and visual communication systems. The Bamford Review, in its limited consideration of the provision of services to individuals with ASD, pointed out the importance of good systems of training.

The "I Exist" campaign highlighted the gap between the support that adults with ASD need and what they actually receive. The fact that there is no accurate figure for the number of people suffering from ASD is a major problem for service provision. The lack of co-ordination across services and Departments is a significant factor in limiting service development and funding priorities. However, a review of the research

evidence suggests that there is a lack of available services for people with ASD. Services are inadequate, and they can also take years to obtain, when early intervention is so important.

There are three main options for improving on ASD services. First, the Government can continue to use the existing policy mechanisms to provide services for individuals with ASD but apply extra funding. The Department's action plan takes that route, and that is not adequate. Secondly, the Government can strategically examine what they want to achieve in providing ASD services and can develop a civic, cross-cutting strategy to improve on the co-ordination of the services and eliminate gaps.

The all-party group proposes that a third option be taken. The Government can create a legal obligation for action on ASD by enshrining it in legislation. That approach is taken by the Autism Bill, and we believe that that is the way forward. There is no legislation in the United Kingdom or Ireland that is specific to ASD. ASD-specific legislation is needed, and the all-party group proposes a number of options.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member agree that the position of the Ulster Unionist Party on an autism Bill is, to put it mildly, all over the place? A Member from that party who spoke supported the Bill last week but does not support it this week. A Member from that party signed the petition of support to the Bill last week but withdrew his name this week. At Westminster, the private Member's Bill is supported by the Ulster Unionists' sister party, the Tories. Indeed, that Bill is being advanced by a Tory.

**Mr B Wilson:** I agree; I am not particularly clear on where the Ulster Unionists stand on the issue. Legislation is essential.

First, legislation that relates to information gathering, similar to that which exists in the United States, is inadequate. That type of legislation ensures that research is being funded and carried out to map ASD with a specific aim to inform service planning. Secondly, legislation can be sought to counter discrimination against people with ASD, including filling the gaps where existing legislation is believed not to be adequate. The third option is to create legislation that requires Government to provide autism services or which establishes a specific autism strategy. That is addressed by the Autism Bill.

Therefore, I appeal to the disability community to support the legislation, and I support the motion.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** I thank the proposers of the motion. The debate has been interesting, although Members have talked a lot about legislation and not enough about what needs to be done.

4.00 pm

Given the importance and priority that all of us attach to autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), the debate provides a welcome opportunity to outline the way forward. Prevalence rates have been discussed and argued over by experts for many years. There is no universally accepted figure. However, the medical-research figure of approximately 90 cases per 10,000 people provides a useful starting point.

It would be a mistake to suggest that any one exercise or action will lead to the identification of all ASD cases in Northern Ireland. One of my first actions as Health Minister was to set up an independent review of autism services, which was chaired by Lord Maginnis. That did not need legislation forcing me to do it: I did it because I knew that it needed to be done.

Following on from that review, my Department is preparing an ASD action plan, which will be published shortly. The plan will promote earlier identification and diagnosis. It will also ensure better co-ordination and collaboration with other agencies and Departments to provide services that are linked to people who are affected by ASD at all stages of their lives. Some Members made those points. Perhaps not all Members have had time to read the action plan.

It will take time, plus the co-operation of different Departments and agencies together with the expertise that is available in the voluntary and community sector, to compile an overall picture of all of those who are affected. Even when that is done, there will still be cases where people have not had contact with providers or a need for services, including health and social care, further education, social security or specific housing needs.

The absence of a quick fix or any easy answer should not deflect us from the task of compiling data to piece together more accurate figures for the numbers that are involved. That information will help to inform the development of a range of services across a range of Departments. Research on ASD is under way across the world, and new ideas and information will inform the development of services. As we gain more understanding, we can develop and refine our services, and also promote awareness and more targeted training to help us to understand ASD and to help individual families and carers.

We need to promote an understanding that individuals can be affected by autism in different ways and to different extents. As a result, some people need different types and levels of help. The most effective response that we can offer is a wide range of services that can address the needs of individual cases. Many of us have an understanding of the challenges that are faced by individuals, their families and carers, including difficulties with language and communication; with social and emotional interaction; and with flexibility of

thought and imagination. That can be associated with a range of learning disabilities and other conditions, which can make diagnosis extremely difficult.

Many individuals who are affected by ASD may have no learning disabilities. Some people with ASD will have average or above-average intelligence. Some people can seem to function in everyday life, but may struggle with social interaction or with transitions through different stages of their lives. Some might live their lives in a state of constant distress. If we are to cover all of the need for all cases, we must ensure that the policies, services and approaches that we develop fit together. That needs to cover issues that include health and social care, social security, education, further education, housing, employment and leisure facilities.

There have been some calls for autism-specific legislation. My response was to put that question to an independent review of autism services. The review team concluded that it did not regard autism-specific legislation as necessary or appropriate at this stage. Indeed, I have listened to the debate and I am still waiting to hear what exactly is missing from Northern Ireland's legislation that I need to put in place in order to allow me to address those needs. We already have full-scale equality and disability legislation — more than any other part of the UK.

That does not suggest that autism is less of a priority, or less of a challenge for families or individuals, or that the gap between the services that we have and those that we need is reduced in any way. If anyone doubts the urgency and importance that are attached to autism services, they can look at the actions that I have taken.

I announced an independent review and, 12 months later, published a draft strategic action plan for public consultation. I am sure that Members will agree that actions speak louder than legislation. After the consultation, I anticipate that the full action plan will be published in May.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for giving way. The longer I listen to the Minister's response to the debate, the angrier I become. If the Minister had been outside the Building today, he would have seen at first hand the number of people that are crying out for help. I can speak with some authority, because although it is not in the same bracket as autism, I know exactly what people with young people need at the moment. The Minister is rambling, and he does not seem close to outlining the help that those people will receive. They do not need help next year or the year after — they need it now. On behalf of the people who have come here today, I plead with the Minister — and other Ministers — to get their head around this issue and to provide the services now that those people need.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** That was a ramble if ever there was

one. Mr McCarthy has, clearly, not listened to a word that I have said. I am taking action, and that is why I have produced the strategy and the action plan. The proposed full action plan will be ready for publication in May 2010. I cannot be any clearer.

I intend to improve autism services without preventing people from accessing other services or promoting competition between different groups that lobby for resources. Part of the problem is that nobody has identified a specific legislative gap that needs filled. The range of powers available to me is already broad and comprehensive. If we are unable to deliver a service or an action at some point in the future because of legal barriers, we can revisit the issue then. For the time being, that seems unlikely.

**Mr Durkan:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** No; I will carry on for a minute, and then let the Member in.

Meeting the respite needs of individuals who are affected by learning disabilities — including autism — is a high priority for everyone. Plans are in place to gain more detailed information on respite services across all the health and social care trusts. That will provide a clearer picture of the overall provision and inform the process of developing respite services in the future.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for giving way. We must be careful about contraposing the strategy and action plan that the Minister has mentioned with the need for legislation. Those of us who argue for the introduction of legislation do not support it at the expense of a strategy or action plan. However, those who argue against legislation seem to support a strategy without legislation.

Has the Minister read the private Member's Bill at Westminster? Essentially, it covers the six key points that Lord Morrow outlined that are not covered by existing Northern Ireland legislation. Nobody is obliged to obtain information about the number of children and adults with ASD. One service is not obliged to inform another service, and legislation would create such provision. The Minister might be concerned that legislation would be health-specific and centred solely in one Department. However, nobody in the House wants a Bill that centres solely on his Department; it should take in other Departments as well.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Member mentioned action versus legislation. I have heard a lot of talk about legislation; I am saying that I have the legislation that I require right now. Members should let me know if they identify a gap — I will fill that gap. However, right now, I am talking about addressing the matter. When I became a Minister two years ago, that was one of my first actions. Although the Department is finally about to publish its

action plan, people such as Kieran McCarthy are calling for legislation, and nothing but legislation.

World autism awareness day is on Thursday. It will help to raise awareness about autistic spectrum disorders. We need all the autism awareness days that we can get; we need to raise autism awareness every day. That is why the ASD action plan places an emphasis on providing awareness training and, where appropriate, more specialist training. Part of the consultation exercise on the ASD strategic action plan asks for ideas on engaging with others and working in partnership in order to promote ASD services.

We have a wealth of ideas and opinions on how to engage with others. The historic underfunding of services for those affected by autism has meant that many people have experienced difficulties. That needs to end.

Autism services need to improve to ensure an improved quality of life for individuals and their families. It is an indicator of the importance attached to autism services by all those involved, myself included, that over £2 million in investment has been secured for autism services. Alongside with that new funding, trusts have been set a new target under the priorities for action for 2009-2010 whereby, by March 2010, no child will wait longer than 13 weeks for assessment following referral, and a further 13 weeks for commencement of specialised treatment. Lord Morrow said that the Minister should take note; it should be clear from the priorities for action — which were published some time ago — that I did take note.

Money will never be the only way to improve services, and services do not have to be resource intensive. We need to identify and share examples of best practice, and take note of what individuals, families and carers have to say about services. Examples of best practice are evident in the voluntary and community sector, where people know how to innovate and develop services using the available resources. That sector also provides an essential resource for families and statutory services. We can always rely on those in the voluntary and community sector to tell it as they see it, rather than telling us what we want to hear.

We need to hear all of the various opinions and take account of the full range of voices in the voluntary and community sector. The need to develop more services to meet the needs of adults who are affected by autism is clear and accepted by all concerned. The need to develop services for people of all ages is outlined in the ASD strategic action plan — it is not simply about children. The ASD regional group, to be established as part of the action plan, will take forward a range of actions intended to raise both the range and level of services for adults — and people of all ages — who are affected by autism.

The regional group will be led by the Health Department and the five trusts, and will comprise representatives of DSD, the Department of Education, DCAL, and the voluntary and community sector. We are preparing our action plan for publication; other Departments can then see what we propose to do, and how we will need to get it done. The plans that those Departments make to develop and improve their services will be discussed through the regional ASD group, and can work alongside the plans of my Department.

Only by close co-operation and collaboration can we help to close all of the gaps and provide the full range of services that are needed. This is not a matter for the Department of Health alone. I am gratified to discover that all other parties support the initiative, support sufferers of ASD, and recognise the need to go forward. As those parties control the other Departments, I am sure that I will have absolutely no problem in getting that co-operation.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have just finished, so the Member will have to shout at me another day.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Before continuing with the winding-up speech, I shall say a few words on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, of which I am the Deputy Chairperson. The Health Committee has taken a key interest in the issue of autism, and has been supportive of efforts to improve services for people with autism.

We pressed the Minister to address the issue, and welcomed the setting up of the independent review of autism services in September 2007. Lord Maginnis, who chaired that review, briefed the Committee when his report was published in July 2008. A draft action plan, to which the Minister has referred, was subsequently published and put out for consultation. The Committee listened to a range of views, and paid a visit to Wales, before making a response to that action plan.

The main issue that was highlighted by the Committee, and about which we have heard several times throughout the debate, was that the draft action plan seeks to address services for people with ASD solely from a health perspective. We need a much more holistic approach. In his evidence to the Committee, Lord Maginnis acknowledged that shortcoming when he told us that the one constraint on our inquiry was that we did not have the authority to step outside the parameters dictated by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Lord Maginnis also felt that other Departments had no desire to co-operate, and unless that is overcome difficulties will emerge in future.

4.15 pm

**Mr D Bradley:** Does the Member agree with me that the present piecemeal provision leads only to the type of wrangling that we have heard today over the Middletown centre? Does she also agree that we need the services of the Department of Education, DEL, DCAL and DSD as well as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and that the most effective vehicle for the delivery of that cross-cutting support is autism legislation?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree fully with him. Representatives of Autism NI and the National Autistic Society stressed to the Committee that the needs of people with autism can be met only by cross-departmental action with a legislative imperative.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am running out of time. If I have time at the end, I will give way.

When we visited the Welsh Assembly Government we learned that three years ago they adopted a social-care model of services for people of all ages with autism involving not just their Department for Health and Social Services but their Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills and other Departments. A strategic autism action plan for Wales was published in April 2008 and signed off by the Ministers for those aforementioned Departments. They stressed that working in partnership, especially with the voluntary sector, was the key to success in that area. We also witnessed partnerships in action when we visited a number of projects in Wales. There is much that we can learn from how autism is dealt with there.

I welcome the opportunity to bring the Assembly's attention to the Committee's main recommendation to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Committee put forward the view that although autism is primarily a health issue, other Departments, including the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department for Social Development and the justice system have a crucial role to play. The development of the autism action plan offers an opportunity to broaden the approach to developing comprehensive services for people of all ages with autism. The Committee strongly recommends that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should take this issue to the Executive and seek the establishment of a ministerial subgroup to develop a joined-up approach to the issue. We await the publication of the Minister's response.

Speaking as an MLA and as a member of the Assembly all-party group on autism, I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. The majority of parties in the House have sent a clear message to those who live with autism every day — and to the parents, carers

and friends who took the time to come to the steps of Stormont this morning — that we will support them in their cause and for the protection of their rights.

A number of key issues were highlighted during the debate, one of which is that autism does not fit in existing legislation. I want to tell the House what autism is not: it is not a learning, physical or sensory disability; it is not a mental-health issue, a medical condition or a disease. It is a social and communication disability. It can exist alongside any of those other disabilities, but it is not a causal factor. With autism, all the normal rules are suspended.

How can a person teach or live with someone who cannot process or cope with social situations? How do we ensure that people with autism are not excluded? We can start by recognising autism as a social and communication disability. That is a vital step in moving forward. It is only then that we will be able to see adjustments and ensure that protections are put in place.

**Mr I McCrea:** Does the Member agree with me that there is a need for specialised social workers who have the understanding and the skills that are required to work with young people and adults with autism?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I could not agree more with the Member.

I am running out of time, and I want to make a comment about the parental lobby, as many parents and carers were on the steps of Stormont this morning. We must put on record our strong support for those parents and thank them for their continued lobbying. Not for the first time, they came here to lobby us because they want no less than the protection of their children's rights. Since I was elected to the Assembly in 2007, the autism lobby in my constituency of Mid Ulster has been very strong and has been the first at my door. Two women in particular — Ann McIlvenny and Cecilia O'Hagan — have worked tirelessly on autism issues across Mid Ulster and have provided immense support to parents in the area.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind the Member that she was allocated 10 minutes in which to speak; she can slow down. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr B McCrea:** Do not tell her to slow down, Mr Deputy Speaker. She said that she would give way to me at the end of her winding-up speech if there is time.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Continue, Mrs O'Neill.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker — a common criticism of me is that I speak too quickly.

I make it clear to the House that we need to recognise that lack of support and care for parents of children with autism leads to high stress levels among them. Therefore, we need to do all that we can to counteract that and support them.

A number of Members referred to the need to support adults with autism. Again, I welcome the attention that has been brought to that issue today. We also need to focus our attention on adults with autism.

Several Members spoke about early intervention and diagnosis. Ian McCrea referred to the fact that some commentators have said that diagnosis is a label that perhaps prevents inclusion. However, "diagnosis" is not a dirty word — it gives direction to parents in seeking support and signposts services and easily identifiable needs. Early intervention is the key to assisting children with autism. The Keyhole programme of early intervention, which was mentioned earlier, has been proven internationally. Despite that fact, the programme is not provided comprehensively across the North. If it could be applied here, that would ensure that there is a mechanism for all parents to access whatever types of interventions they think appropriate for their children.

The comments made by the UUP about the centre of excellence at Middletown were said, perhaps, to try to deflect attention away from the fact that its members stood up in the House today and said that they will not support the autism lobby for legislation. That is unfortunate. I think that John McCallister commented that the lobby is categorically not needed. I do not know how he has the expertise to make that assumption.

**Mr B McCrea:** I wear the same badge; I have the same tie, and I have been involved in the issue from the start. Therefore, I categorically reject the allegation that people are trying to play politics with the issue. Frankly, I find the allegation distasteful. The Minister of Education was challenged about Middletown. Members of the Committee for Education talked about the centre. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety stood here and said that he does not need legislation, because he has all the legislation he needs. If any Member can point to an area in which something needs to be done but that the Minister does not have the power to address, speak now and the Minister will seek that legislation. That is the challenge. This is not about politics, it is about action.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am going to move into the reasons why we need autism legislation. I say to the Member that I find it distasteful that his party will not support the autism legislation today.

Much work has been done by the autism lobby to progress the Autism Bill, which will enshrine, in legislation, the rights and entitlements of those in the autistic spectrum. I remind Members that that is not a privilege for autistic children and adults; it is a right. The legislation will place a legal imperative on those responsible to work together to provide services; it will ensure that parents are given official recognition of their child's disability and it will ensure and establish

foundation principles and guidance to establish a cross-cutting strategy. With the best will in the world, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — who has taken action, which we welcome — has no control over the other Departments. Therefore, a legal imperative is needed so that all Departments have to work together in order to improve services for people with autism.

In conclusion — I am not going to have time to refer to the Minister's comments — I commend the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education for their work in improving the lives of individuals living with autism. However, the challenge is this: autistic spectrum disorder does not fit into the current system — there remains inequality of provision. Autism is an invisible disability that needs attention and needs addressed now. A number of motions on the issue have been passed unanimously in the House; however, action has been lacking. We need to see action and we need to send a clear message to the parents and carers of those with autism that this is an equality issue and that we are going to see it through. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am afraid that the Member's time really is up now.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the high rate of autism and the consequent development challenges to Government and non-Government agencies across health, education and social care; and commends the United Nations designation of 2 April as world autism awareness day and the invitation to all Member States to observe this day annually to raise public awareness of autism.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Sales of Alcohol to Minors

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

**Mr Poots:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a series of measures on off-licence sales of alcohol to reduce its availability to minors.

It does not give me any great joy to bring this motion to the House. As I researched the issue, what I found became quite scary. I have to say to the Minister for Social Development that we are sitting on a time bomb, and we need action soon because there are major problems with regard to young people and the consumption of alcohol, and how that affects our society. First, they are damaging their own health. Secondly, they are jeopardising their own future. Thirdly, they are damaging the social infrastructure that we enjoy.

The statistics are quite alarming. I do not normally make much reference to notes when I am speaking, but today I will make considerable reference to them because there are so many statistics on the issue. For example, 17 million units of alcohol are consumed by minors — youngsters between the ages of 11 and 17 — each week. That is equivalent to 1·7 million bottles of wine or 6·9 million pints of beer. By the age of 16, most children have consumed alcohol; in fact, when 360,000 children in the United Kingdom were surveyed, they said that they had been drunk the previous week, and 3·5 million of our young people have consumed alcohol.

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

In Northern Ireland in 2006-07, just short of 400 young people were admitted to hospital as a consequence of alcohol consumption. That is not the figure for those who attended accident and emergency units but the number who were actually admitted to hospital.

What are the consequences for society? Clearly, the resultant antisocial behaviour is a consequence for society. We saw the consequences of alcohol abuse on Saturday, although the people involved were adults rather than young people or children. Nonetheless, much of the violence that took place on Saturday was related to the abuse of alcohol, and many of those involved will have started drinking when they were young.

Of the 10- to 17-year-olds who regularly drink, 39% have committed a violent offence, 34% have committed a theft and 17% have committed criminal damage. In

2004-05, 359 young offenders in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre admitted that they had a dependency on alcohol, 468 admitted an addiction to either drugs or alcohol and only 58 could say that they were not dependent on either alcohol or drugs. That is an indication of the link between the abuse of alcohol and violent crime carried out by young people. When we hear stories from our senior citizens and from other young people who have been targeted by some of those individuals, no one can deny that we have a major problem in our towns and cities.

It is concerning that 27% of young people indicated that they had bought alcohol themselves, so they did not need an older person to purchase alcohol for them. We need to take cognisance of that, because not enough is being done on that front; I hope to hear some positive suggestions from the Minister. In 2002, one licensee was prosecuted and convicted of selling alcohol to a minor. In 2003, 2004 and 2005 there were no convictions, and, in 2006, there was one conviction.

Do not dare tell me that enough is being done when just two people from the licensed trade have been prosecuted in the past five years, and 27% of young people who say that they are consuming alcohol say that they are buying it themselves, because those two facts do not stand up. Evidently, something has to be done.

4.30 pm

As for the damage that these young people are doing to their bodies, I will quote some of the adverse consequences that the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, cited in his 'Draft Guidance on the Consumption of Alcohol by Children and Young People':

"Young people are not immune to the chronic diseases and conditions associated with excess alcohol consumption in adults, and deaths from liver disease are now occurring at younger ages.

Adolescents and young people who drink and drive, or allow themselves to be carried by a drink driver, are more likely to be involved in a car accident.

Adolescents and young people who drink alcohol are more likely to sustain an injury, often as a result of an assault.

Alcohol abuse in adolescence, during a developmentally sensitive period, poses a particular danger to the emerging brain faculties of executive functioning and long term memory.

Adolescents are likely to be more vulnerable to adults to both subtle brain damage and long lasting cognitive deficits following alcohol exposure.

Alcohol may increase feelings of depression.

Stress/anxiety based drinking is associated with long-term and more severe negative outcomes.

There is a relationship between adolescent alcohol use and mental health problems.

Alcohol consumption during an evening may affect a child's performance at school on the following day.

There are associations between alcohol consumption and subsequent behaviour with peers and friends. Excessive alcohol can be detrimental to a young person being able to maintain friendships.

Alcohol consumption can have a detrimental effect on young people's short term educational performance.

Alcohol consumption by young people, particularly students, is more likely to make them vulnerable to being the victims of crime.

Alcohol may make some young people more likely to display aggressive behaviour, although it is likely that other factors such as their personality and family life will play a role.

Alcohol consumption is associated with: not using a condom during a young person's first sexual encounter; an increased likelihood of having sex at a younger age; unprotected sex; teenage pregnancy and the likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted diseases."

The case for the damage to the individuals is clear. The case for the damage to society is clear. The case for the absence of qualitative work that is being done to reduce alcohol consumption is also clear.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has set out a strategy for 2006-2011 to address the misuse of alcohol. That strategy is based very strongly on education — that is fair enough, but it is not enough.

I suggest that we examine several possibilities. First, I believe that there should be no sale of alcohol to people under the age of 21. The establishment of such a measure would help to tackle the problem of young people obtaining alcohol. That has already been done in the United States of America, it is being looked at in Scotland, and we could take a lead on that issue.

Off-licences should not be allowed to sell alcohol in bags that are not labelled with their name. It is strange that nearly every company except off-licences wants to advertise their names by labelling bags.

There should be a differential pricing structure in respect of pubs and off-licences. Promotions by many off-licences and supermarkets encourage a considerable amount of alcohol to be consumed. For example, one supermarket in December 2008 took a £22 million loss-leading strategy on the sale of alcohol. Consequentially, far more of it was sold. In Scandinavian countries in particular, where alcohol is more expensive, less of it is sold.

The police should have greater powers of confiscation, whereby the drink does not have to be opened. If someone who is underage has drink on them, the police should have the power to confiscate all the drink that they have. There must be stronger regulation of outlets that sell drink.

I had to be in the Royal Victoria Hospital with a relative earlier this year, and over half of the people in the accident and emergency department in midweek had injured themselves as a result of alcohol. We must do something about alcohol, and we must do it now.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in what is a very important debate, and I thank the proposer for the motion.

As the Member pointed out, there has been a marked change in the patterns of drinking among young people over the past 10 years. Statistics show that more and more young people are misusing alcohol. Children have started drinking as young as 11 in Ireland, and Ireland as a whole has one of the highest levels of binge drinking among the 15 to 16 age group in Europe. One need only take a look at our streets during the weekend or in a holiday period to see the level of alcohol misuse, particularly among young people.

Alcohol misuse can have consequences for young people themselves, their families and the community in general. Young people are more vulnerable to suffering physical, emotional and social harm from drinking alcohol, and it can lead to their having mental-health problems or becoming involved in antisocial activity. There are also links between heavy binge drinking and violent crime.

The number of children in treatment for alcohol misuse is also on the increase. Therefore, there is a real need for young people who have alcohol-misuse problems to get residential service and care and the help and support that they need to overcome their addiction. However, we must also look at innovative ways in which to tackle underage drinking and at providing alternatives for younger people.

The Colin area of my West Belfast constituency has a midnight football project that has been running very successfully for a number of years — people from the community sector give their time free on a Friday night to bring teams of local young people together to take part in competitions. That has worked very well, and we need more of those intervention projects. It is not enough to say that we must tackle underage drinking; we must be realistic and have alternative activities for those young people. While there are a number of local initiatives involving statutory, community and political representatives working together, it is clear that more must be done to provide such activities.

However, we must also use existing legislation more vigorously and introduce further legislation, where necessary, in order to stop on-street drinking, which has become a major problem in most communities. There is evidence of a link between the number of outlets selling alcohol in an area and the level of drink-related problems. There is also a connection between the price and consumption of alcohol.

There is, therefore, a clear onus on off-licences and supermarkets that sell alcohol to ensure that they do so in a responsible manner. Last year, our party brought a motion to the Assembly that called for off-licences to be compelled to label their carrier bags so that the sources of alcohol for young people were clearly identified — an initiative that worked very well several years

ago, when some local off-licences in my constituency voluntarily participated in such a scheme.

Drinks promotions must also be more controlled — particularly offers that encourage multiple purchasing — because evidence shows that young people are particularly influenced by specific alcoholic drinks, and if those can be obtained cheaply they will buy even more, which may end up in the hands of very vulnerable young people.

We must all be realistic, because adolescence is a period in which young people begin to experiment with alcohol and when they can be influenced by more sinister elements in society. It is also a period during which choices that they make can have a long-term impact on the course of their lives. There is a responsibility on all of us — parents, Governments, schools, communities, police and the drinks industry — to ensure that the scourge of underage drinking is tackled and that young people have positive influences when they make life choices.

We must consider putting new initiatives in place, including the provision of more intervention projects such as midnight soccer and the opening of youth centres late into the evening and at weekends, where trained people can be on hand for young people to talk to about any problems that may lead to alcohol misuse. For many young people, alcohol misuse can be a symptom of a wider problem.

Therefore, there are short- and longer-term measures that we must put in place if we are seriously to make a difference in tackling underage and on-street drinking, which have become too acceptable and create problems for individuals, their families and the community in general. I support the motion.

**Mr Armstrong:** The motion relates to an issue of great importance — the sale of alcohol to minors — and it is another example of the need for joined-up government that involves the Departments responsible for Health, Social Development and Education.

Few could argue that alcohol abuse is not a real problem in Northern Ireland and in wider British society. Above all, it affects young people, particularly females. The UK has some of the highest levels of drunkenness in Europe, and Northern Ireland is not exempt. Much media attention has focused on the growth of binge drinking. Many young people, regardless of whether they have reached the legal age for alcohol consumption, drink a great deal, and they seem to consider that drinking themselves into a state of near oblivion is part of a good night's craic.

I am not a killjoy; I too enjoy a social drink. However, I am scared by what I see at closing time on Saturday nights on the streets in towns and cities and by the problem that faces society. Last year, the British Medical Association (BMA) highlighted the problem

in its report, 'Alcohol Misuse: Tackling the UK Epidemic'. According to the BMA, 11 is the average age at which the first alcoholic drink is taken in Northern Ireland, and the greatest increase in drinking occurs between the ages of 11 and 13. An incredible 80% of all 16-year-olds have taken a drink. That is scandalous; they are children.

Such a state of affairs has major health and safety implications, because the consequences are short and long term. Alcohol consumption, particularly when heavy and prolonged, is associated with a wide range of medical conditions and is a significant cause of premature death worldwide.

Excessive alcohol consumption is linked to domestic violence, road-traffic accidents, cancer, heart attacks and liver disease. Alcohol abuse is associated with crime, violence and antisocial behaviour, and it has an adverse impact on family and community life. Drunk people are often victims of crime because they are incapable of thinking straight and are unable to defend themselves. There is a real risk that the dangerous level of drinking by young people today will set the pattern for their behaviour as young adults and will have serious repercussions on their long-term health and well-being.

A co-ordinated approach is required, because the current policies clearly do not work. It is not enough to educate young people on the effects of alcohol through health-promotion and education programmes. That message is not getting through. The fact that so many underage drinkers have easy access to alcohol indicates that something is badly wrong. The availability of alcohol that is sometimes even cheaper than water must be addressed. The law must be enforced properly and rigorously, and those who sell alcohol to underage drinkers must be punished severely. The crisis has been ongoing for some time, and we can no longer sit back and do nothing.

**Mrs Hanna:** I support the motion and thank those Members who tabled it.

Strong evidence exists that the consumption of alcohol by young people is on the rise. Children who are aged as young as 11 are drinking to excess, and the fact that some who are aged 14 or 15 are being identified as regular drinkers means that alcohol abuse is a huge problem. As Edwin Poots said, it could be described as a ticking time bomb that is damaging health, families and lives. It could also be said that, as a society, we are drowning in drink. Is it any wonder that many young people abuse alcohol?

One of the biggest worries for parents must be — and should be — underage drinking and alcohol abuse. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety reminds us daily of the frightening and fatal repercussions of binge drinking and alcohol abuse.

Unfortunately, no single answer can solve the problem of underage drinking. Some options are worth considering. For example, it is important to educate and train off-licence staff and proprietors, and it is advisable to establish responsible management policies and adequate supervision.

4.45 pm

Robust identification checks are very important, and they should be used to deter underage people from purchasing alcohol. There should also be sufficient numbers of staff working in the evenings and at weekends when most of the alcohol is purchased. Up-to-date information about the laws and penalties needs to be passed on to licensees to highlight the need to avoid some sales and to remind them of their responsibilities, as well as to ensure that they know that they will be prosecuted if they do not adhere to the laws. In fact, they must be prosecuted.

As Members will know, illegal access to alcohol is rife across Northern Ireland. There are persistent offenders, and, unfortunately, the enforcement rates with regard to underage sales of alcohol are low. Therefore, there must be more enforcement. All retailers, including off-licences, need to work more closely with the PSNI and with Trading Standards Service to ensure that best practice is shared on how we can best reduce opportunities for young people to buy alcohol.

The effective delivery of education regarding the damage that alcohol causes to our young people must be delivered in schools and colleges. We also have to promote more sport in school and encourage health and fitness, and we should encourage young people to take part in sport for its own sake — not everyone is into competitive sport. We have to get our young people active for various health reasons, but, particularly, so that they may become more concerned and think more about what they put into their bodies.

The impact of alcohol abuse is having a crippling effect on NHS resources, and it is getting worse. Excessive drinking is primarily an issue for the Department of Health, but it needs a cross-departmental and organisational approach, with input from the Department for Social Development in relation to trading standards, including off-licence sales of alcohol; from the Department of Education; from district councils for the enforcement of by-laws; from the PSNI; from the Court Service; as well as from health, voluntary and community organisations, residents groups and churches; and, of course, from the parents. The parents are an essential element, and they must be involved in any strategy to tackle the problem.

Alcohol plays too significant a part in our culture, in our society and in our economy, and, given the potentially damaging impact of alcohol misuse for our young

people, we need that multifaceted approach. Underage drinking happens not only via off-licences, but via supermarkets, pubs and clubs, and that is why we need a wider approach.

Although today's motion addresses underage drinking, many of our concerns apply equally to alcohol abuse generally, but that debate is for another day. The Minister for Social Development is committed to maximising the contribution that liquor licensing legislation can make to tackling alcohol abuse in underage people, and, along with the Committee for Social Development and the Executive, I have no doubt that she will consider the best way forward.

**Ms Lo:** Underage drinking is an increasing problem in Northern Ireland, and I continually hear complaints about it in my constituency. It is disturbing to learn that, on average, young people take their first drink at under 12 years of age. Children say that they have easy access to cheap drink through purchasing from supermarkets or off-licences. Sometimes, they get it from proxy purchasing by irresponsible adults who buy drinks on their behalf. It is well evidenced that underage drinking causes not only health and behavioural problems for the individuals, but social problems for all of us.

Alcohol abuse by young people can lead to ill health, poor school attainment, antisocial behaviour, crime, accidents, injuries, rape and teenage pregnancies, all of which place burdens on public services, which should be put to better use.

The Minister for Social Development's proposed Bill to amend the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 was announced in November 2008. It set out a range of new proposals to update liquor licensing, and I very much welcome the proposed reform.

The proposed new law will provide a number of measures that are aimed at tackling underage drinking. First, it will give the police and the courts powers to close licensed premises immediately, and for up to 24 hours. Secondly, the proposed penalty points system will lead to suspensions of liquor licences for premises. Thirdly, the introduction of a new statutory proof-of-age scheme — and the compulsory display of specified signage about that new scheme — will make it clear that shop and pub staff have the right to see ID from purchasers if they are in doubt about their age. Such new steps must be rigorously enforced.

Furthermore, as has been the case with the police in England and Wales for the past six years, the Police Service of Northern Ireland should also be given the power to carry out test purchasing, which is conducted with a code of best practice and takes into account the participants' safety and welfare. That will discourage licensed premises, supermarkets and off-licences from selling alcohol to underage drinkers.

Test-purchasing operations in Great Britain have led to a large number of warnings and prosecutions, and it has been proven that such schemes contribute significantly to the reduction of drink-related crime and disorder. Belfast City Council has already set the precedent here by undertaking test purchases on sales of cigarettes to children under the age of 16, while the PSNI also carried out a test-purchasing initiative in 2004 to good effect, which received support from the public.

Apart from law enforcement, it is also important to encourage the retail sector to observe their social responsibilities by not selling alcoholic drinks to minors. The owners and staff need training in following guidelines to ask for proof of identity, as a matter of course. Furthermore, if IT reminders can be built into cash tills to prompt staff to check proof of identity when flavoured alcoholic drinks are purchased, such devices should be used.

Underage drinking is a scourge on our society, but it is not only the responsibility of Government. Parents, teachers, youth workers, the drinks industry and communities must also work together to guide our young people, and provide them with positive role models.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch):** The Committee for Social Development considered the Minister's proposals for liquor licensing at its meeting of 25 September 2008. With the rest of the House, Committee members listened with interest to the Minister's statement on that subject on 17 November 2008.

The abuse of alcohol is a blight on families, communities and many parts of society throughout Northern Ireland. The Committee was unanimous in expressing its concern about the growing excesses in the consumption of alcohol, particularly among young people, and it agreed that steps needed to be taken to make a real difference and to address the problem.

The Committee largely welcomed the Minister's proposals on liquor licensing, particularly the introduction of a statutory proof-of-age scheme. Members of the Committee felt that such a scheme was necessary, but not sufficient, to curtail alcohol consumption among minors, and that the scheme must be backed up by test-purchase arrangements. Under those arrangements, young people who clearly look underage are sent into off-licences by the PSNI to test whether illegal purchases can be made. Although members of the Committee recognised the need for test purchases, they also expressed concerns on the safety protocols that must be in place to protect those young people. Notwithstanding that reservation, the Committee supports the idea of a statutory proof-of-age scheme.

Members of the Committee raised concerns about the practice of proxy purchasing. That is when adults purchase alcohol on behalf of children. It is clear that a

statutory proof-of-age scheme will not eliminate that problem and may lead to an increase in the practice of proxy purchasing.

The Committee has recommended to the Minister that she augment her liquor-licence proposals so that the PSNI could ban from particular off-licences those individuals who are engaged in proxy purchasing.

Members of the Committee highlighted the successes of the community off-sales initiative (COSI) in Belfast. They believe that that initiative should be used to supplement the Minister's statutory proof-of-age scheme, and they support a clampdown on the practice of proxy purchasing on behalf of underage drinkers.

The Committee was exercised by the use of alcohol promotions. Members said that cheap alcohol, which is sometimes cheaper than soft drinks or bottled water, leads to more alcohol consumption among young people. Some Committee members recommended minimum pricing for alcohol, but the Committee recognised the difficulty of fixing minimum prices without there being corresponding arrangements in other jurisdictions.

The Committee supports the motion and urges the Minister to bring forward her liquor-licence proposals and to consider amendments to proposals that have been made in light of the comments of the Committee for Social Development.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son an rúin.

I speak in support of the broad thrust of the motion, because we have to take steps to ensure that alcohol is not found in the hands of minors. That goes without saying. Members who have spoken have outlined a variety of reasons that alcohol should not be sold to minors, and each of those reasons is valid. It leads to crime among young people and results in antisocial behaviour. Underage drinking has health implications, and the age profile of people drinking alcohol is reducing by the year.

We have to avoid the situation where we think that the sale of alcohol to minors is the responsibility of a single agency or that a single law will prevent the phenomenon. We have to find other ways to tackle the problem and to ensure that the emphasis on dealing with the matter is not reduced to being the responsibility of one agency, the people who sell alcohol, or the people who are tasked with making sure that it is not being sold to minors. We have to find a more collaborative and collective way of doing that.

Last year, an Assembly Ad Hoc Committee examined some of the issues to do with on-street drinking and problems relating to the designated places in which it was impossible to seize alcohol from minors — and even from people who are not minors. The whole

problem of the sale of alcohol to minors should not be seen as a single issue.

Of course, people who sell alcohol have a responsibility to ensure that they do not sell it to minors. They must do everything that is in their power and follow the letter of their licence to ensure that they do not do so. The same point should be made in respect of enforcement. Measures should be taken; it should not be seen as a nuisance or as something that is impossible to do. Many things can be done.

I want to return to the idea of a collective and collaborative approach and look at some examples that are best placed in good practice. They do not need legislation, but they do require some application. For example, for the past four years, the civic alcohol forum in Derry city has been chaired by the mayor. That forum comprises interested parties and agencies across the board: individuals who are involved in working with young people; representatives from the vintner trade; the PSNI; representatives from political parties; and community representatives. It has a wide remit in dealing with minors, and it is innovative in its approach.

In the past number of years, we have seen the effect that the forum has had in the city, particularly during the Halloween festival and other on-street festivals, during which alcohol abuse — by young people in particular — was a phenomenon. The forum is trying to create a climate in which young people realise that they can go on the streets and enjoy themselves without having to drink alcohol. Young people follow that example.

5.00 pm

Other initiatives need to be taken also. Edwin Poots, and my colleague Jennifer McCann, spoke about such initiatives, and the issue has been debated in the Assembly previously. One initiative that I have seen working in Derry involves off-licences selling alcohol in bags with the store label on them so that people can ascertain where the alcohol came from. Those stores do not do that because of a statutory requirement; they do it as a matter of civic concern.

One major off-licence in Derry has had a hotline in place for the past three or four years. Many people have used it, such as parents, neighbours and those living in the vicinity of the off-licence. It has had an impact: many young people now say that they now do not go to such establishments. Of course, that can also create an issue of displacement — if young people know not to go to one store, they will go elsewhere. However, the principle remains important — if people apply themselves, they can come up with measures to deal with the problem.

Where such initiatives work, we should be encouraging people to continue with them. Another example is that local taxi firms, through a sort of

self-proclaimed charter, do not take young people to off-licences. Young people going to off-licences and then congregating outside them was a phenomenon in the city in which taxi firms sometimes unwittingly took part. Those taxi firms have now taken steps to ensure that that does not happen. Similarly, they have a charter — again, self-proclaimed — regarding deliveries, in that they do not perform deliveries unless the customers are regular customers whom they know to be of a responsible age.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr McCartney:** I am sorry, I did not realise that my time had run out.

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Members who brought the motion before the House. However, there is something regrettable about society if we find ourselves in the position of having to bring a motion such as this before the House. It is obvious that there is something wrong that needs to be addressed, and it is patently obvious that that has not been done to date.

I am firmly of the school of thought that lays a lot of the responsibility and blame on parents; I believe that when law and order breaks down on the streets, it has already broken down in the home. All parents have a big responsibility, as do those who sell alcohol to minors — that is, people who are under 18 years of age. At times, they do not fully take that responsibility on board, and the issue has to be addressed at that level also.

When I was looking into this subject — and I am sorry that I did not get as much time to prepare for the debate as I would have liked — I found that some research material makes very startling reading. Around the House, Members have constantly brought questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the sale of alcohol to minors.

Just before the Deputy Speaker called me to speak, I was reading information on how, at Christmas time, minors, or young people, were told to enjoy their Christmas, but to “know your limits”. There is something wrong with a message that says “know your limits”, because, as far as I am concerned, the limits for a minor are zero — they should not touch alcohol. That is the message that needs to be got out to minors, not that they should go out and enjoy themselves but know their limits, because that puts out the wrong message altogether.

As I look through some of the material that I have been gathering in relation to the debate, particularly information on some recent court appearances, it is patently obvious that there is an enforcement issue, and one that needs to be addressed at a social level. Very often, we say that an issue needs to be addressed

in schools, and we turn to teachers. Although this issue does need to be addressed in schools, it also needs to be addressed in the home. As elected representatives to this Assembly, we should never be afraid to say that. We always seem to want to place responsibility at some other place or with someone else, but responsibility starts in the home.

Recently, I read in a newspaper that children as young as 11 years of age are getting access to alcohol, which is something that Carmel Hanna also said during her contribution. What are parents doing while their 11-year-old child is accessing alcohol? Responsibility does not always lie with someone else; there is a responsibility in the home.

As I looked through the research papers, I saw that my colleague Lord Browne had asked the Minister of Health and Social Services whether he would consider raising the age for buying alcohol from 18 to 21. I wish that the Minister had been more positive and said that yes, he would, as that is what should be happening.

My colleague David Hilditch asked the Minister a similar question about the misuse of alcohol by minors. Members have asked questions about alcohol statistics, and the answers reveal that the numbers run into hundreds. Jim Shannon asked for a breakdown for each constituency, and the startling figure that came back was a total of 670. That is 670 young people who have had access to alcohol or who have a criminal record as a result.

I have information to hand, which I will not read out, about the number of youths under 17 years of age who cannot be named for consuming alcohol and intoxicating liquor in public — they are described as youths who cannot be named. There is a challenge for the whole spectrum of society to admit that there is a problem that must be tackled directly by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister for Social Development.

**Mr B McCrea:** There is no doubt that there is a problem with minors drinking — particularly binge drinking — and the problem is not just for them but for society. Mr Poots referred to the number of people who end up in accident and emergency departments. There is also the amount of time that police spend on drink-related matters over a weekend and for anyone who has been on a response team, the question is not whether we have a problem but how we fix it.

This may be a mea culpa, but I drank before the age of 18, and I wonder how many other Members in the Chamber had a drink before they were 18. Before I reached the heady age of 18, it was almost a fixation among young people to try to get a drink, because that was part of socialising. One should not underestimate the powerful drive in adolescents for trying to get a drink — it is part of their culture. However, we must

find a way to curtail such activity. Now that I am slightly older and slightly wiser, I realise that it was not the best plan.

One could start by looking at the issue of control and consider more draconian ID cards — photo ID or fingerprints — and the legal age for drinking could be raised to 21.

Recently, I introduced a motion in front of about 150 children at W5, where I proposed that the legal age limit should be raised from 18 to 21, in which I was opposed by someone from advertising. A vote was taken before the debate, which I lost 132 to 18. After I had given my best pitch about raising the age limit to 21 and had finished talking, I had reduced the deficit to 112 v 38 — I had saved 20 people. That shows that there is an issue.

In this House we talk about engaging with young people. Perhaps the legal age for drinking should be raised to 21; perhaps the age of sexual consent should be 17; and perhaps the voting age should be reduced to 16. I hear many people say that they can vote but they cannot drink.

About a week ago, I attended at a meeting in the Presbyterian centre, where one of the young people said that we should reduce the legal age for drinking. Jim Fitzpatrick asked her to what age it should be reduced, and she replied that it should be reduced to 12 years of age. There were 350 young people at the meeting, and they all cheered. The danger of introducing legislation to raise the legal age at which one can drink is that we make drinking seem more attractive to children.

Where I agree absolutely with Lord Morrow — and I am in great danger of always having to follow him because I am always agreeing with him, which is, I think, more of a problem for me than for him — is about the attitudes of parents. The issue comes down to parents. I am sorry, but there is an issue about rites of passage. There is an issue whereby people force drink on young people, and say: “Go on, son, have a drink”. I do not know whether we have all done that, but we have certainly all seen it — and what are people to think of that?

So, one comes to some of the issues that might be addressed. I have heard people say that this is more than just the responsibility of the Minister for Social Development. I do think that a holistic approach is necessary. It is, perhaps, something on which the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) should take the lead. There is the issue about there not being enough facilities for our young people. Where do they go? What do they do at night? Youth clubs close at 9.00 pm, or they do not open at weekends.

More needs to be put into sport. More needs to be done with regard to volunteering. Those were the volunteers about whom I spoke who came along and

talked about those issues. I really do think that that whole issue is the forgotten sector. The youth sector is, perhaps, something that we, as an Assembly, ought to promote and fund and do more with — not just because it is youth, but because alcohol and other risky behaviour have such a long-term impact.

Our schools should start to consider informing our young people about what is actually going on with the development of the brain. The more that I learn about these things, the more I realise how long it takes for all of the brain's neural wiring to complete. That has to be explained to young people, and they will work it out for themselves.

I agree that we do not want drink to be cheap. We do not want dial-a-drink, which is when a person phones up Sainsbury's and gets drink delivered to their house, or, as Raymond McCartney said, in Londonderry taxis deliver drink. We do not want advertising, and we do not want pop groups. However, we have to treat people responsibly. I would urge a holistic approach, and perhaps the Minister will raise that with her Executive colleagues with regard to the way forward.

**Mr A Maginness:** This motion is very restrictive in its approach to the subject of alcohol abuse by minors. The motion does not, in my opinion, reflect the full extent of the problem and the full extent of the approach that must be taken to resolve the issue. It is based primarily on regulation, and regulation is fair enough. All of us in this House would agree that regulation should be improved, applied rigorously and tightened up. I think that everyone agrees with that.

However, that will not resolve the problem of alcohol abuse by minors. The experience in Europe — in Spain, France, Italy, Greece and even Croatia — is that people take drink and, very largely, behave. The only people who I have seen misbehaving with drink in countries such as Spain and France are the Irish or, indeed, the British. There is something in our culture — whether that be Irish or British — that tolerates the abuse of alcohol. I do not understand why that is so. Therefore, there is a cultural problem that has to be addressed by way of education and other means, although I do not know how. However, the problem is more than simply one of regulation.

There have been some innovative ideas. People have talked about raising the legal drinking age to 21. I do not know whether simply raising the age will resolve the problem. There is a problem at present with identifying young people. It is difficult for people in off-licences to be certain that a young person is of the age to consume or purchase alcohol. It has been suggested that we brand bags so that we know where the drink has come from.

5.15 pm

If, say, Mr Poots had an off-licence, the bags would be “Poots’s” bags. I see that Ms McCann has left the Chamber, but if she owned an off-licence, the bags would be “Jennifer McCann’s” bags. Of course, people will be mischievous and mix the bags up, and, in such circumstances, we will not be able to identify where the drink has come from. People will deliberately confuse the issue. Therefore, I do not think that there is any simple solution by way of regulation.

**Mr Poots:** I have listened to the Member for three-and-a-half minutes, and his argument seems to be that there is no point in doing anything. I suggest that it is better to do something than to do nothing.

**Mr A Maginness:** Mr Poots has misunderstood or misheard. I said that regulation is important and that it is a feature of the whole regime that one would adopt to tackle the problem of alcohol abuse by minors. However, it is only one aspect of the problem. The cultural aspect is very important, and addressing it involves education. Alcohol abuse is a public-health problem, and, again, we need education to address it. My point is that regulation alone will not solve the problem. The Minister has wisely proposed a statutory proof-of-age scheme, and that is important. It is also important that penalty points be introduced to penalise off-licences that serve young people. Similarly, test purchasing is a necessary weapon.

However, a more fundamental problem is the relatively low price of drink. What are we doing about that? Indeed, does the Assembly have the power to control the price of drink? I am not certain that we do, but we can perhaps explore that matter. The price of drink has remained unchanged for many years. Yes, it has gone up in actual figures, but, in real terms, the price has remained fairly stable for a long time. In relative terms, drink is quite cheap.

The problem arises from a degree of relative affluence in our communities, whereby people have a relative amount of cash with which to purchase cheap drink. That is a source of temptation for young people. We must take a much broader view of the situation.

**Mr Craig:** There is no question about it: young people aged 12 and up — and sometimes even younger — are being supplied with drink. We heard that fact mentioned in many of today’s speeches, and there can be no argument about it. Who is supplying them? The answer is so-called friends, and, unfortunately, family members. Indeed, as Lord Morrow pointed out, even parents are supplying drink to young people.

If we think that that is not a serious problem, let us look at the statistics: 48% of 10- to-17-year-olds obtain alcohol from their parents. That is the scale of the problem with regard to parental responsibility. Police officers in my constituency have carried out stings to

find out who is supplying drink to young people in areas where there are problems with antisocial behaviour. Many times, those officers have reported to me that it is the parents who are dropping their young people off in those areas. It is the old Nimby situation; those parents do not want antisocial behaviour in their own backyard, but they are quite content to drop their children off somewhere else and allow a situation to develop there.

Is that an enormous problem for society? I believe that it is. In my constituency, there are over 122 referrals to the youth-justice system every month — all for alcohol-related problems and antisocial behaviour occurring in Lagan Valley.

I do not believe for one second that Lagan Valley is any worse or better than any other constituency, but those are enormous statistics. Alcohol is even being brought into schools, which have to face that problem every day.

Alcohol misuse costs Northern Ireland approximately £800 million a year, but what are the real costs that cannot be calculated in pounds and pence? What about family members who suffer the consequences of what some young people are doing? People who start so young do not learn how to drink responsibly. A lot of them have huge difficulties with drink later in life, and many families have to live with that massive problem. I have personal experience of friends who got caught up in the circle of alcohol abuse, leading to their premature death. That continues to happen, and it is a huge issue.

Is it acceptable, as the Minister of Health stated yesterday, that alcohol is 64% cheaper in real terms than it was 30 years ago? Is it acceptable for off-licences to not put labels on their bags? Why do some off-licences not want labels on their bags? Tesco and Sainsbury’s proudly advertise on their carrier bags, but why do off-licences run away from doing the same? Is it because they know full well where the drink is going?

Should the minimum age for drinking alcohol be raised to 21? We often hear about issues concerning ID cards; identification would not eliminate the problem, but it would help. More specifically, should drink advertisers be forced to match-fund the Health Service with the money that they spend on alcohol advertisements? Should alcohol advertisements have to contain a health warning in large, bold font, similar to the warnings on cigarette boxes? We need to look at the actions of the drinks industry if we are serious about tackling the issue.

What about the action that is taken against those who are caught plying young people with drink? Such people cannot be let off with a slap on the back of the hand, because that does not work. The fines and penalties handed to those people must be increased if they are to

work as a deterrent — the current measures are not working. Every day, up to 13 teenagers are admitted to hospital due to binge drinking, which is an 11% rise since the mid-1990s. The current approach to educating young people about drink is not working, and, therefore, I support the motion.

**Miss McIlveen:** I, too, support the motion. Mr Maginness criticised its wording, but I remind him that he had an opportunity to table an amendment in advance of the debate, which may have been helpful. I appreciate that the Minister for Social Development is here to respond to the debate, but other Departments also need to be involved and should not shirk responsibility for the matter.

We debated a similar motion in April last year — it does not seem as long ago — that called on the Minister to introduce measures to tackle the increasing levels of alcohol misuse. I realise, of course, that the ills of society cannot be cured overnight. However, for some reason, there is a sense of national pride and identity in the amount of alcohol that can be drunk, and that filters down to our children. The Assembly needs to consider a framework of measures to cut across Departments and deal with education, treatment and enforcement measures.

As the twelfth Member to speak in the debate, there is very little new that I can add. I do not intend to rehearse arguments on the impact of underage drinking on healthcare, policing and our society in general, but a number of improvements should be made. Surveys and research have cited attempts to demonstrate maturity, peer pressure and rebellion against parents as among the causes of underage drinking. However, we must also consider the impact of a lack of parental supervision, inappropriate role models, and the way in which alcohol is presented by the media in advertising, television programmes and newspaper stories.

One need only look at programmes such as ‘Big Brother’, in which housemates are supplied with alcohol to encourage certain behaviour in order to liven things up in the house and generate interest. That sets an incredibly bad example to young people.

We must consider the outlets that supply alcohol. Are they doing enough to ensure that what they sell does not make its way into the hands of minors? Not only must IDs be checked more stringently but, as already stated, legislation should be promulgated to ensure that alcohol is not sold at a low price that makes it more accessible to minors. Supermarkets are bound by competition laws that prevent them from fixing prices between them, but there is nothing to stop Government introducing legislation to regulate alcohol pricing.

Enforcement issues range from reserved matters — such as the seizing of alcohol from minors and the manner in which alcohol-related crime is dealt with in the courts — to prosecuting establishments that are

guilty of making alcohol available to minors, either through direct selling or indirect supply, and tightening the licensing process to exclude repeat offenders, thus placing the onus on vendors to take measures to prevent alcohol from falling into the wrong hands. Licensing is a matter for DSD but, as Anna Lo and other Members said, the police should be encouraged to use the powers at their disposal, such as test purchases of alcohol, seizure of alcohol consumed in a public place and the issue of fixed penalty notices — all of which are in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008.

The weekend before last, Jim Shannon and I had the privilege of being on patrol with police in our constituency. Drinking hot spots are well known, and the police are doing all they can with limited resources; that is another issue that should be addressed. Furthermore, I wish to see an increase in prosecutions of establishments caught selling alcohol to minors. Effective enforcement will ensure that off-licences and bars act much more responsibly.

In the last debate in the Assembly on this subject, we discussed measures implemented by Ards Borough Council, the police and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I will spare Members a reiteration of what was said and refer them instead to the Hansard report. At that time, I called for such schemes to be rolled out across Northern Ireland, and today I repeat that call.

We need to address a mindset that has become the norm in our society and we must challenge it by whatever means at our disposal. Education alone will not solve the problem, but it plays a vital role. Young people need to be made aware of the dangers that alcohol presents not only to themselves but to society in general. It is not an easy problem to tackle, but successfully addressing it will be of immeasurable significance to society.

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I am grateful to Edwin Poots and Jim Shannon, as I am sure other Members are, for providing the Assembly with an opportunity to discuss this important topic. I am also grateful to all the other Members who have contributed to the debate. Like many, I agree that this is not solely about regulation: we need a holistic approach that encompasses public health, education and many other approaches.

The disgraceful scenes that we witnessed in the Holyland area of South Belfast and those of last week referred to by Mr Poots leave us in no doubt that there is an onus on Members, as public representatives, to unite to tackle the scourge of alcohol abuse.

Alcohol abuse also goes on behind closed doors. I am grateful to Mr Poots and Mr Shannon for bringing forward such an open-ended motion. Most motions in this respect urge me and fellow Ministers to take

specific action to combat alcohol abuse, but this motion is completely non-prescriptive.

However, as Minister with responsibility for liquor licensing legislation, I have been asked to make some unspecified changes to our laws to guarantee resolution of a complex, cross-cutting social problem that has bedevilled and continues to bedevil every jurisdiction in these islands and further afield. That is a tall order, as I think all Members will agree.

5.30 pm

I was confident that the absence of clear recommendations to be explored in debate would not deter Members from coming up with a wide range of ideas about what I should do. I have not been disappointed. I have heard many points — many of them familiar — about many issues to do with alcohol-related harm.

Some of those issues, and some of the solutions, fall within my area of responsibility. The remainder, which form the large majority, fall to other Executive or Whitehall Ministers and, in particular, to the police. However, I recognise that combating underage drinking and alcohol-related harm demands co-ordinated partnership working. I am happy to restate my commitment to maximising the contribution that liquor licensing and neighbourhood renewal, which are my responsibilities, can make — along with other initiatives from the public, private and community sectors — to tackle alcohol abuse by under-18s and others.

I draw Members' attention to the fact that Mr Poots and Mr Shannon first tabled the motion six months ago, in October 2008. Since then, I am pleased to report, a lot of headway has been made on reforming and strengthening licensing laws. It may be helpful if I take a moment to briefly update the House on that progress.

I will begin by touching on the proposed licensing and registration of clubs (amendment) (Northern Ireland) Bill. For some time, I have been convinced that stricter enforcement measures are urgently needed to address growing public-health problems, disorder and underage drinking in Northern Ireland. For those reasons, I decided to introduce, in the first instance, a short Bill containing new enforcement provisions, which earlier consultations had shown to have widespread public support.

In September 2008, I submitted a policy memorandum for a Bill to the Executive for their consideration. On 17 November 2008, I made a statement to the House announcing my proposals. On 29 January 2009, I received Executive approval for the Bill. The Bill will form the first stage of a two-stage approach to reforming the law. I hope that that Bill will be introduced in the Assembly by this summer and will be in operation by early 2010.

The Bill will introduce three enforcement measures that will apply to all licensed premises, including

off-licences and registered clubs. First, the Bill will amend the existing law by providing the police with powers to close registered clubs or licensed premises immediately, for up to 24 hours, because of disorder or noise nuisance. Secondly, the Bill will introduce a new penalty-points scheme under which points may be endorsed on a licence or club certificate following convictions for breaches of the law. The new points system, which will be unique to Northern Ireland, will target persistent offenders. It will provide for underage sales to attract mandatory points, which will lead to the suspension of a licence certificate if the offender accumulates a certain number of points in a three-year period.

The Bill will introduce a new statutory proof-of-age scheme which, for the first time, will specify acceptable proof-of-age documents. Those documents will be a passport, a photo-card driving licence, a Northern Ireland electoral card and any proof of age standards scheme (PASS) accredited photo-identity card.

Clubs and licensed premises will be obliged to prominently display a notice that draws attention to the proof-of-age requirements. The notice will also make it clear that it is an offence for under 18s to buy alcohol, for anyone else to buy it for them or for staff to sell it to them. Furthermore, it will list the penalties for those offences.

DSD officials have been in touch with trade representatives, the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Office, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Northern Ireland Court Service to ensure that the arrangements for giving effect to the enforcement proposals in my Bill are practical, acceptable and fit for purpose. Work is continuing to finalise the detailed drafting, and I am confident that we are on track to meet my goal of bringing it forward in the summer.

I am confident that those measures will support our common goal of protecting our children and young people from the harm of underage drinking, however and wherever the alcohol is obtained. When taken in conjunction with the new test-purchasing powers, which the PSNI hopes to bring into use in the summer, those measures should be even more effective.

The new enforcement measures that are contained in the Bill will be steps in the right direction. However, we are all realistic enough to know that fighting alcohol abuse and its effects is a continuous process. One principle remains unchanged, however, and that is the importance of striking a proper balance between combating abuse and respecting valid social and economic freedoms.

I have looked over the key themes and concerns that have emerged in discussions since the Assembly returned. Those can be grouped and reflected as

strategic propositions. First, there should be a co-ordinated approach to dealing with alcohol across Departments and across the public, private and community sectors. Secondly, we must educate people about the dangers and effects of alcohol. Thirdly, existing laws should be better enforced and strengthened. Fourthly, alcohol should be more responsibly marketed, more tightly regulated and made less accessible. Some of those propositions, such as better co-ordination, education and enforcement appear to be incontrovertibly good measures.

Everyone would probably favour a co-ordinated approach to handling alcohol in society. Good education about the effects of alcohol would help us all, and it would especially help young people to make better-informed choices and to avoid damage and damage-limitation costs further down the line. We have already adopted better enforcement of laws to regulate alcohol in society, and that must surely help.

Other propositions are more problematic, and, as always, the devil is in the detail. If strengthening our laws, promoting more responsible marketing or making alcohol less accessible means, in practice, limiting the rights of the moderate, law-abiding majority to enjoy alcohol and of respectable traders to trade in it on an equal footing with their competitors, we will not easily reach consensus. We must, therefore, try to advance by means of fair compromises and good judgement, and we must certainly not rush to impose measures in reaction to the latest headlines. We must be careful.

In every case, we must be able to demonstrate that our preferred course of action is grounded in robust evidence, is proportionate to what we perceive to be the problem, is within our legislative competence and does not fall foul of British or European law, including the European Convention on Human Rights.

Sometimes, ideas that appear simple and attractive can, on further investigation, throw up significant challenges to putting them into effect. Introducing a legal requirement for off-licences to mark containers and label plastic bags is a classic case in point. On the face of it, that seems to be a straightforward proposition, yet the difficulties with its introduction far outweigh any benefits that it might bring. For example, there are issues to do with EU legislation.

As my colleague Mr Maginness pointed out, there are also issues with regard to evidence in court. Bags that are given out with purchases from Mr Poots's off licence, for example, could be transferred to an off licence that is owned by Ms McCann. Therefore, the labelling of plastic bags throws up certain problems.

I have kept a close eye on developments elsewhere that are relevant to our situation and which have, in some cases, stimulated calls from Members for similar local action. The Scottish Government are planning to

prevent the sale of alcohol as a loss leader and thereby stop off sales supplying free and reduced-price alcohol if one or more of that product, or any other product, is bought. They are also considering raising to 21 the minimum age for off-sales purchases in their area.

Whitehall has made action on young people and alcohol a priority and will work more closely with the alcohol industry to continue to reduce sales to underage persons. Recently, Ministers there decided to introduce a mandatory code of practice for the alcohol industry using the Policing and Crime Bill that was introduced in December 2008. They have also arranged to review the voluntary agreement whereby the trade must put alcohol health information on cans and bottles. The findings will help them to decide whether stronger provision in the form of a legal requirement is needed. Finally, they will study recent research on alcohol and pricing to help them to decide what further action may be necessary to make an impact on alcohol-related harm.

We have all followed the recent revelations from the minimum-pricing debate in Britain, and I, for one, will continue to watch that space with considerable interest. The National Assembly for Wales plans to look at a national proof-of-age scheme and to monitor British developments on pricing and promotion. In 2008, the Irish Government introduced stronger legislation to combat underage drinking. The new law provides the gardaí with powers to carry out test purchasing and to seize alcohol from persons who are under 18 years of age and in places where they believe public disorder may occur. It also introduces mixed trading regulations, similar to those that were introduced in the North in 1997, which require pubs and nightclubs to have CCTV systems in place.

In conclusion, ministerial colleagues and I can introduce measures, not just through licensing legislation, but wherever we judge that they can be effective to reduce and counter alcohol-related harm, particularly when it affects young people. I have made a start and the Executive have backed me and my Bill. I have plans to do more. I will watch and carefully consider identified good practice; in that context, I aim to meet ministerial colleagues from Scotland and elsewhere. I will assess how lessons that have been learnt can be applied here, if necessary, in a way that is proportionate to our situation.

In the end, the debate must extend beyond licensing: there are huge health issues and policing challenges. Perhaps, most of all, there is the challenge to change the drinking culture away from the extreme consumption that is prevalent at present. If we are serious, well-thought-out and joined-up action is required. I will play my part. I will not, however, bring forward measures for the sake of scoring political points or in a knee-jerk reaction to the latest headlines. Abuse of alcohol and

its availability to young people is much too serious a matter for that.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank all Members who participated in the debate for their valuable and knowledgeable contributions. The sale of alcohol to minors is an enormous problem, and the Minister acknowledged that in her summing-up remarks. In my winding-up speech, I will deal with the remarks that were made by other Members and the Minister.

As an elected representative, I face problems that concern community safety daily. Each day, people come into my office whose homes have been torn apart by alcohol and, to a lesser extent, drug abuse. Those are real problems. Every year in the UK, there are 1.5 million victims of alcohol-fuelled violence. That is a fact. It is clear that community safety is threatened by the misuse of alcohol. Police superintendents advise that alcohol is a factor in half of all crime. A Home Office study found that the growth in beer consumption is the single most important factor in violent crimes against the person. Research also shows that a high proportion of victims of violent crime are under the influence of alcohol at the time of their assault.

5.45 pm

In an analysis of data that was drawn from 41 probation areas between April 2004 and March 2005, the offender assessment system analysis team found that — and these are scary facts that no other Member mentioned — 37% of offenders currently had a problem with alcohol use, 37% had a problem with binge drinking, 47% had misused alcohol in the past and 32% used violent behaviour that is related to their alcohol use. Those are shocking statistics that paint a clear picture of the need for change, which must begin with young people learning to drink responsibly at an appropriate age — 18.

Every Member is concerned that young people, on average, start to drink at the age of 11. We must address that problem. The problem begins between the ages of 11 and 16 and impacts on people when they reach an age at which they must get a job. The statistics show that some people are drunk as many as 20 times a month. Those are incredible and worrying facts. Northern Ireland has the highest rate of binge drinking in Europe, which is worrying. Drinking is related to other problems such as underage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, theft, vandalism, violence and traffic accidents. We must address those issues, which affect home life and communities.

In my constituency, I work with community groups and residents' associations that are determined to stamp out abuse in their areas. Members mentioned offering education programmes for children and providing a safer option than standing on street corners. Jennifer McCann mentioned midnight football, which is a good

example that will be replicated this year in Killyleagh and Crossgar in my constituency. Although I do not ignore the negatives, I always try to focus on taking positive steps. Community groups in my area are working hard to end the vicious circle of alcoholism and drug abuse. However, they cannot do so alone, and, therefore, we have brought the motion to the Chamber today in order to obtain support.

It would be remiss of me not to say a few words in Ulster Scots. I will restrict it to two sentences.

Strang drink althers personalities an when young fowk ir onie learnin' wha they ir, tae add strang drink tae the mix means at they wulnae iver hae a richt unnerstannin o' wha they ir.

Alcohol changes personalities, and when young people are learning who they are, adding alcohol to the mix will prevent them from gaining a good understanding of who they can be. The Chamber made a clear decision on cigarettes. Although I welcome many of the issues that the Minister raised, it is important that we do more.

My colleague Edwin Poots and I discussed the matter and realised that we both felt strongly about it. There are clear examples of underage drinking in both our constituencies, and, therefore, we brought the motion to the Assembly. Mr Poots underlined that prosecutions are non-existent. The Minister's response indicated that the situation will change, but only time will tell. As Members know from their constituency work, young people become aggressive when using alcohol. The Chamber needs to send a clear message today to those people who have the power to make changes, namely those who sell the drink in off-licences to parents and family members. Many issues need to be addressed.

About half a dozen Members referred to the age of 11 as the time when some young people start drinking. I think Basil McCrea mentioned that, at an event for young people, they were asked at what age they should be able to drink alcohol, and when the answer of 12 was given, they all cheered. That should tell us something about our society. It makes the issues clear for each of us.

Jennifer McCann, who is no longer present, referred to the midnight football scheme that has been successful in west Belfast, and will be successful elsewhere — a scheme is being established in Newtownards. It takes people away from temptation and puts their focus and energy into football — that is important. She also mentioned the need to control drink promotions. I think the point she was making is that cheap drink leads to more drunks, which is a symptom of a wider problem.

Billy Armstrong — in between fighting with his mobile phone — managed to express some points of view about the problems of promiscuity among young people, particularly young girls. That is a UK epidemic.

Carmel Hanna always makes a valuable contribution to debates, especially those on health or social issues. She referred to the problem as a time bomb ticking away and said that the Province, and the whole of the UK, is “drowning in drink”. The facts and figures outline for many of us what we are trying to deliver. She also said that the solution is education in schools and colleges. The police, too, have a role to play, as do parents.

Anna Lo also referred to alcohol abuse destroying lives. She mentioned the issue of test purchasing, about which we have had a positive response from the Minister. David Hilditch, the Chairperson of the Committee, also mentioned the Committee’s recommendations in relation to proof of age and test purchasing. He was concerned too about proxy purchasing. Furthermore, there is something wrong with a society in which the price of drink is lower than the price of bottled water.

Raymond McCartney made some very positive comments and provided some ideas on how to address the problem. He referred to the civic alcohol forum in Londonderry, as well as the hotline, and the issue of taxis. I ask the Minister to take those issues on board, because they are positive ways in which we can do something.

Lord Morrow said that it was regrettable that the matter must be brought to the House, and he is right. He also said that the blame lies with the parents, which I think is correct. Parents have a responsibility. Members of Ards DPP went on patrol with the police, as my colleague Michelle McIlveen mentioned. It was obvious that some of the kids were actually getting drink from their parents. I find that disconcerting.

Basil McCrea mentioned that they had changed the opinion of 20 people. That was good news — we must get him on the promotion trail.

Thank goodness for Edwin Poots, who brought Alban Maginness back to the issue, and provided focus again. Jonathan Craig mentioned the issue of people starting young and ending up with drink problems in years to come. Michelle McIlveen referred to the need for a framework across all Departments. The Minister also mentioned that in her response.

I thank the Minister for her comments and her positive attitude. We hope that people will be educated about alcohol, that there will be cross-departmental approval for any measures put in place, that the existing laws will be enforced and that alcohol will be promoted more appropriately. I urge the Minister to support the “blue bag” legislation and the moves to raise the legal age for buying alcohol to 21 and to take on board the ideas from Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

We have made a start; we have got a response. However, we look for more, because more is needed. I

thank every Member who spoke in the debate and the Minister for her contribution.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a series of measures on off-licence sales of alcohol to reduce its availability to minors.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### Urban Renewal Status for Upper Long Streets in North Belfast

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately 10 minutes.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son na díospóireachta.

I thank the Business Committee for its support in selecting this Adjournment topic, which is very topical — pardon the pun.

As was mentioned yesterday at Question Time, during questions to the Minister for Social Development, the residents of the upper long streets have been campaigning since 2002 for full redevelopment of that area. Those residents have consistently raised the need for full redevelopment of their area.

During Question Time yesterday, the Minister raised the issue of what has become known as blighted areas. For Members who do not know, such areas can include locations affected by dereliction, some of which can be attributed to absentee landlords or to a general running-down in appearance, which results in the environmental neglect of a whole area.

It is to the residents' credit that they have persisted in maintaining their homes to the best of their ability in spite of everything and have consistently fought for full regeneration for that part of the New Lodge Road. Anyone walking through the area can only be struck by the number of homes that have been steeled up and remain derelict.

Many representations were made to direct rule Ministers and to the Housing Executive. Indeed, there is quite some interest in the regeneration of the upper long streets, and North Belfast in general, from human rights and equality activists. There is huge concern about what the Minister said yesterday. She told the House:

“The Housing Executive is now working on new proposals for a major refurbishment project that would update and refresh those homes in greatest need, with demolition only for those homes that are beyond repair.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 39, p296, col 1*].

That has caused a lot of alarm. Today's Adjournment debate, therefore, has come at a very good time.

The Minister also said:

“78% of residents think that their accommodation is suitable for their needs.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 39, p296, col 1*].

I contest that. There have been many appraisals, evaluations and reports on the issue. Today, many residents are asking how a previously refurbished home can be refurbished again. That is just one example of what we feel is going to be a cosmetic exercise. In the case of the upper long streets, we are not talking about cracks; we are talking about chasms. The houses are in a really bad state of repair, and many people believe that they are unfit and beyond further refurbishment.

Previous economic appraisals have advocated proposals for full redevelopment. Therefore, the question that needs to be answered today is whether the residents of the upper long streets who are living in poor conditions are now going to have to accept second-class services and facilities from the Department for Social Development. Do they not, and can they not, expect to enjoy the same facilities and the same state of repair of their homes as, for example, people in Downpatrick?

The houses that we are talking about today are approximately 130 years old and were refurbished in the 1970s and 1980s. Those works were undertaken then with the expectation that the houses would not last for more than 20 years: we are well beyond that point now.

The Minister has yet to meet the democratically elected residents' committee. The committee holds regular meetings with the Housing Executive and other statutory bodies, and, in conjunction with the community empowerment project in the area, has audited all the residents of the upper long streets on the matter on at least one occasion. Many houses in the area remain derelict, and in light of the Minister's comments yesterday, there is now real concern about future plans and for the residents' proposals.

I appeal to the Minister and to all the North Belfast MLAs to listen to the concerns that have been expressed. I thank Fred Cobain and Alban Maginness for being here. I ask that we set aside our political differences, because we need to step up to the mark and stand beside the residents in this case. Today, we are talking about the upper long streets, but tomorrow, Fred could be talking about Tigers Bay, Victoria, Parkside and the Glen. I suspect that we will be here again shortly.

The Minister said that she did not want anyone to be without a home in an area of high social need, and neither do I. However, we cannot stand by and condemn the residents to houses that, according to the Minister, only deserve another refurbishment. That is not acceptable.

6.00 pm

We have heard concerns, comments and speculation about the architectural integrity of those old houses and about the need for them to be preserved. On the one hand, those concerns are valid. On the other hand

— and with the greatest respect to the Environment Agency — the real concern is that those homes are not fit for habitation and cannot withstand, or endure, another refurbishment. Architectural concerns should never have primacy over the people who live in those houses and their quality of life.

The Minister knows full well — she is well acquainted with this issue — that the waiting list for houses in North Belfast is one of the worst in the North. We have the unfortunate situation whereby, in some instances, three generations of the one family are now living under one roof. That is not Sinn Féin rhetoric; that is a reality, and it is one that is resulting in a poor quality of life for many people.

The proposals to redevelop the upper long streets are and will continue to be an equality issue. Those residents deserve better than this. They deserve to have the issue resolved. The speculation over what the latest proposals will contain needs to end. I view this situation as an issue of social justice. I appeal to the Minister to meet the elected residents' committee for the upper long streets to discuss how the issue will be taken forward. I urge the other Members for North Belfast to support that residents committee and the other residents' committees that will no doubt face the same uncertainty about regeneration in their own areas. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Cobain:** I thank the Member for raising this issue in the Assembly today. Although we are discussing the long streets, we could be discussing Tigers Bay, Parkside or anywhere in North Belfast. The issue for us is that all those areas need redevelopment, and they need it quickly. I want to raise three issues — and I emphasise to the Minister that I am speaking only on behalf of the people whom I represent in North Belfast.

First, the issue of refurbishment — which I have heard mentioned on three or four occasions over the past number of months — is, as far as I am concerned, a non-runner. People in these areas suffered through refurbishments in the 1970s and 1980s. Those houses are as bad today as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. We are not going to support any more refurbishments, because those houses need to be redeveloped.

The people who live in those homes need houses for the twenty-first century. Whether it be the long streets or anywhere else in North Belfast, that is what is needed. We will not accept anything less than twenty-first-century homes for the people who live in those areas. The Minister needs to take on board the fact that we will not support refurbishment.

I have listened to the arguments made for refurbishment. It is argued that if homes are refurbished, there will still be the same number of homes as there were, and that because of the waiting lists, it is important to retain the number of homes. That is not the issue. The

issue is that some of those homes are not fit for habitation, and irrespective of how much money is spent on them they still will not be fit for the twenty-first century.

In some cases, two houses have been knocked into one; carbuncles have built onto the back of houses; rooms are the wrong shape; or houses are full of damp. Irrespective of how much money is spent on them, those homes are still 100 or 150 years old. It could end up that more money is spent on refurbishment than on renewal. I make it clear to the Minister that there is no possibility of our accepting the refurbishment of homes.

Carál spoke about the environmental architects. Some of those people should go and live in these areas and see what the tenants have to put up with. I agree that we need to retain environmental heritage, but some people get carried away with that idea. Those people should come and live in those houses every day of the week to see the circumstances under which the tenants live.

My second point is that the people who live in those areas have been betrayed by the Executive. The Minister corrected me yesterday when I said that we need between 2,000 and 2,500 new homes every year — she quite rightly said that we need 3,000. We are committed to building 1,500 new social and affordable homes. I emphasise that those houses must be social and affordable — not just social. Affordable homes are for people who can afford a mortgage; the social homes will also have to come out of the 1,500 new homes, and they are for the people whom I am concerned about — the people who are relying on the state to provide a home.

We will get 1,500 new homes, which is half the number that we need. We are in an economic downturn, which will increase the housing pressures through repossessions. The 1,500 new homes are half of what we need now, but, two years from now, they might be a third of what we need. Pressures are growing in respect of people who are dependent on the Executive to provide proper homes for them and their families. Those people do not have anywhere to go — they cannot get mortgages because they do not have the sufficient resources. Due to the tightening of resources in the mortgage market, it is less likely that those people will be able to get mortgages in future, so we need to provide additional homes for them. The building of 1,500 new homes when 3,000 are required will ensure that the housing pressures grow. The Executive have let down and betrayed the people who depend on us for proper homes.

The Minister said that we are going to get 1,750 new homes, but the cost will be borne by people who need new kitchens, new windows and new disability adaptations to their homes. There are people with disabilities who have to wash in hand basins because

they cannot get into their baths, and we do not have the sufficient resources to give them dignity. Those people need urgent help even to maintain basic hygiene, and we do not have the money. That is how low we have sunk in the provision of proper resources for working-class people and families on benefits.

I have listened to the debates on housing here, and I have heard Democratic Unionist Party Members telling other Members to provide an alternative. The Minister of Finance and Personnel came to the House three or four weeks ago and re-prioritised the Budget through the strategic stocktake. He took money away from Departments and allocated it to others without the approval of the House. Mr Durkan raised the issue of properly debating Budgets in the House, but that was pooh-poohed by the two largest parties. That is what is happening: people are prioritising how we spend our money without the approval of the House, and the poor in this city and across Northern Ireland, who depend on us, are not getting what they deserve — they never did, and they are not getting it now.

I support what the Member for North Belfast Ms Ní Chuilín said. I support the provision of sufficient housing for those who need it. I support redevelopment and not refurbishment. I support the provision of proper facilities and help for people with disabilities so that they can have basic dignity. I support the right of people who live in those homes to have a proper kitchen — some kitchens are 30 or 35 years old, and the doors are damaged and cannot be reattached to their frames. Those are the sorts of conditions in which people are living in the twenty-first century.

I support anything that we can do to ensure that a proper focus is placed on this issue. I will speak for myself, and other Members can speak for themselves, but I am not going to sit by any longer and allow people who are socially and economically deprived — the poor in our society — to be marginalised even more. Those days are over for me.

I hope that all the Members who come to the House and talk the grand talk will walk the walk when it comes to supporting issues of social justice and that they are not just cannon fodder for the Executive.

I am happy to support Ms Ní Chuilín, a Member for North Belfast, and I hope that the Members she referred to who support areas where people are deprived — and there are many such areas — will also be on their feet to ensure that proper resources are spent on these people.

**Mr A Maginness:** I am surprised that so few Members from North Belfast are here today, given that this is an issue of extraordinary importance. It is a timely Adjournment debate on an issue that has vexed the people who have lived in the upper long streets for many years. It is frustrating for people to live in certain

conditions and in an area where there is a clear housing need that is not being addressed properly.

I support Mr Cobain's commitment to social justice being a way to alleviate the housing problem in North Belfast, particularly in the upper long streets area. There are 2,400 people on the waiting list, and 1,401 people are in housing stress in North Belfast. We have, particularly in the Catholic community in North Belfast, a shortage of building land that could — or would — accommodate those people who need to be rehoused. In North Belfast, 80% of people on the housing list are from the Catholic community.

A substantial amount of land is available in the shape of Girdwood Barracks. That land could be used for housing development. I hope that that project will come on stream soon so that the housing problem can be alleviated through newbuild, particularly — but not exclusively — for those in the Catholic community. It is important that those who are in need are accommodated fully.

As regards the upper long streets, I and others have supported the campaign for redevelopment that residents in that area have been engaged in. There have been long arguments with the Housing Executive over that particular problem. Redevelopment in the upper long streets must be the objective of the Department for Social Development. The area has been effectively blighted for a long time, and people deserve proper and decent homes. That should be our objective, and I am confident that the Minister for Social Development shares that view.

I hope that Members, particularly those who represent North Belfast, will support the Minister for Social Development in getting the proper funding that is necessary to deal with the housing problem, not just in North Belfast, but across Northern Ireland. People in various other constituencies also have an immense problem. It is therefore quite clear that there is a serious and critical problem with funding for housing.

There will be a shortfall of £100 million for social housing in this financial year.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr A Maginness:** I will give way in just a moment.

How will we deal with that situation? I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will tell us that the problems that the Minister for Social Development has presented to the House on the housing shortfall will be remedied. It is particularly important that he represents North Belfast.

6.15 pm

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for giving way. First, I apologise on behalf of my colleague Gerry Kelly for his absence; he is in Europe. The Member is aware

that Fra McCann, Mickey Brady and I supported his proposal to the Committee for Social Development arguing for more money for the Minister's housing budget.

It is disappointing that there are no Members here from the unionist community other than Fred Cobain, and I thank him for his contribution. However, we will argue for, and support, the call for more money for housing. There is absolutely no difficulty with that, but we must also accept that a lot of money from the Department for Social Development was surrendered, and that is the circle that must be squared.

**Mr A Maginness:** There have been interminable arguments about the surrender of money, and so forth. Without going over well-trammelled or well-trapped territory, all I would say to the Member is that whether or not money has been surrendered is immaterial.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr A Maginness:** No, the Member has made her point and has made it on previous occasions.

There is a shortfall, which affects people not only in the long streets but in other parts of North Belfast, other parts of the city and across Northern Ireland. As public representatives, we must put pressure on the Department of Finance and Personnel to come up with the necessary funding. It is not only a matter of social justice — as Mr Cobain quite properly said — but a matter that will be of great assistance to the community and local economy in spending ourselves out of the recession.

Mr Deputy Speaker knows, and I know, how badly affected the construction industry has been, and this is one way for Government to intervene directly in the economy. Private developers will not build houses because there is no profit in it for them and many of them are almost bankrupt. In any event, they cannot get the necessary cash from the banks in order to start building

However, the Government have an opportunity to plough money into the construction industry, and the best way to do that is through social housing. Mr Cobain is right in stating that we need 3,000 houses a year. Given the resources that the Minister has, she is attempting to build 1,500 or 1,700 houses a year, which is, quite clearly, inadequate. Nonetheless, given the funding that she hoped to have, it is the only way to respond to housing problems.

**Mr Cobain:** The point that Members must continue to make is that, before the economic downturn, the Executive set a target of 1,500 houses. Those people who rely on the state — those who are deprived or “poor”, as we call them — were never going to get a fair deal out of that. Even before the economic downturn, 1,500 houses were all that the Executive were prepared to build. Alban — and all of us — accept that that

number was totally inadequate for the job that must be done in providing social housing.

**Mr A Maginness:** I must conclude fairly soon. When devolution was restored, we all said that we wanted to make a difference, and I am quite certain that my colleagues in the Chamber want to make a difference. I am also sure that the Minister wants to make a difference by improving housing in this society. However, in order to do that we need the proper funding, which not only solves the problem of social justice and of people in the long streets but helps to solve our economic problems. I believe that the motion is timely and that redevelopment is the best way forward.

I am confident that the Minister shares that perspective. I hope that there will be fresh proposals on the long streets soon and that the Housing Executive will firmly commit to their earliest possible implementation.

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I thank the Members who contributed to the debate: Carál Ní Chuilín, Fred Cobain and Alban Maginness. I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate and to respond to each of the contributions, not least because it gives me the opportunity to clarify and correct some of the points that were raised this afternoon. I will try to address all the questions and points that Members raised. However, I assure them that I will study the Hansard report, and, if I have left any unanswered, I will write directly to the Member concerned.

As the Members, as they represent North Belfast, know, the upper long streets is part of the upper New Lodge and approximately 1.25 miles from the city centre. The area contains 211 homes, of which half are in private ownership and one quarter of those privately rented. North Belfast is already recognised as an area of acute housing need, with more than 4,200 people waiting for a home, and, of those, 1,401 are in housing stress. Over the years, the lack of available land to develop for social housing has simply exacerbated the problem, and the number of people in housing stress illustrates how acute the need is in the area.

The Housing Executive has already invested significantly in the area through a programme of improvements to public stock and the promotion of grants for privately owned homes. If examined in the context of other parts of Northern Ireland, North Belfast has received a large share of the overall housing investment programme for some years. However, given the age and condition of many of the houses in the area, further redevelopment work was always going to be necessary.

In recent years, a range of options has been considered for the long streets, each with its own pros and cons. I share the frustration of those who say that

the process has taken too long to reach this point; I agree entirely that it has taken far too long. I have made Upper New Lodge a priority with regard to bringing forward proposals to start that redevelopment. I visited the area several times at the invitation of Mr Maginness. I met some of the residents, and I saw at first hand the condition and size of the houses. Although many homes have been very well maintained, over time many have not.

Although my Department first received specific proposals for the redevelopment work back in September 2006, those underwent various assessments until November of last year. Even allowing for the difficult issues under consideration, such a timetable is simply not satisfactory.

The new proposals included plans to demolish 178 homes, many of which are privately owned. Given that more than half of the homes in the area are privately owned, and very few of those are empty, I must take into account the area's apparent degree of confidence in the future. I do not want to destroy that community stability. Interestingly, however, a survey found that almost 80% of residents considered their accommodation suitable for their needs. That has made it even more difficult for me to accept such a large-scale demolition of houses. Although the houses are old and need substantial refurbishment, they remain perfectly habitable, and are, for the most part, meeting the needs of those who live in them.

However, I listened carefully to Members today. The demolition of those 178 homes was to be offset by the construction of 98 new units of accommodation, because put back is always much less than what was originally there.

That would mean a net loss of 80 homes in an area of great housing need, where a large number of people are on the waiting list or in housing stress. However, it would still have meant that many families would have little choice but to move away from the area. In that respect, people have told me that demolition would mean breaking up the community.

I listened to what Alban Maginness and Mr Cobain said about housing need in North Belfast. That need has been clearly identified by the Housing Executive — 3,000 houses are needed each year for all of Northern Ireland. We propose to build 50% of those houses, but resources remain an issue.

I was glad to hear Members say that there is a need for resources to be invested in the community, but the issue for me is the need to reprofile the housing budget and to put the social housing development programme as the Executive's number-one priority. That will act as a stimulus for the local economy, it will put people back into work, it will sustain existing jobs, and it will ensure that we have a valuable asset — the most

valuable asset that anyone wants is a roof over their heads. It will also ensure that valuable proposals for redevelopment, such as the long streets, can be carried out. However, I need the Executive's support and understanding. I have tried to persuade my Executive colleagues of that, and an independent person is carrying out a piece of work on that issue.

There is an acute housing shortage in North Belfast, and Members will want to reflect on that. However, do we want to provide better housing, and do we want to do that by providing substantially less housing? I will park those questions with Members.

There is no nearby or overspill housing that could be offered to those families; they would have no option but to move out of the area.

I want to touch on an issue that affects Members. We have already addressed the issue of resources, and I look forward to getting support for that, but I want to touch on an issue that deals specifically with North Belfast. Part of the solution to the housing shortage in lower North Belfast will come about if the representatives from the two main parties show political leadership. Sinn Féin and the DUP need to get out from behind their tribal wagons and show a way forward.

I understand the problems with the long streets — I have seen them at first hand. However, there is the issue of housing on the extensive Girdwood Barracks site, which is not far from there, and it will be looming large soon. All the political parties need to step up to the plate on the issue and get their people out of the sectarian trenches. That is how they can show that they care about the provision of housing in lower North Belfast.

I assure Members that I remain totally committed to delivering the work needed to redevelop the upper long streets, but I will not approve wholesale demolition simply because it may be the easiest option. I have asked the Housing Executive to bring forward plans that will allow for those homes to be properly restored and renovated, while using demolition as an option primarily for dwellings that cannot readily be brought back into use. I have asked for those plans to be resubmitted before the end of April, and I want to announce the way forward shortly afterwards. In fact, I have been told that those proposals will be with me next week.

Some of the many residents of the long streets are sitting in the Public Gallery, and others who cannot be with us today because of infirmity deserve some clarity about future plans. As I have shown in the Village in South Belfast and elsewhere, when I have an acceptable solution, I am prepared to move quickly on it.

I want to emphasise that I do not want to prejudge what the Housing Executive's revised proposals will look like.

**Mr Cobain:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have only a few minutes left.

I anticipate several phases of work, with substantial demolition in the early phases. Therefore, I am not simply replacing demolition with refurbishment — I am pushing for the best all-round solution.

I repeat that I do not wish to prejudge what the Housing Executive will do, but I anticipate several phases of work with substantial demolition in the early phases.

*6.30 pm*

Again, I thank all the Members who participated in the debate. I thank Cárál for securing the adjournment debate and for raising a question on the issue yesterday during Question Time. I also thank Fred and Alban for their contributions. All Members who have contributed have done so in a positive manner.

I assure Members that I, the Department and the Housing Executive will continue to work closely and quickly with the local community. Residents will be updated on our future plans for the redevelopment of their community and the redevelopment of the communities that are represented by the other Members present. Residents deserve clarity on this issue, but there are many other issues that deal with the wider housing debate and the wider resource issue.

Cárál raised a point about surrender earlier, and I can clarify that that money was not surrendered. Instead, I requested a reallocation to deal with the pressure in the housing budget —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Minister's time is up.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I re-emphasise the need for the wider Executive to accept that there must be an investment in the overall social-housing development programme.

*Adjourned at 6.31 pm*



# **Written Ministerial Statement**

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.



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# Written Ministerial Statement

*The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.*

## HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

### Public Inquiry into the Clostridium Difficile Outbreak in Northern Health and Social Care Trust Hospitals in 2007-08

*Published on 31 March 2009*

**The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** On 14 October 2008 I advised the Assembly that I would order a public inquiry into the outbreak of Clostridium difficile in Northern Trust hospitals that occurred between June 2007 and August 2008..

The inquiry will be conducted under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005.

In accordance with section 6 of the Act I am now advising the Assembly of the membership of the inquiry panel, and of the terms of the reference for the inquiry.

The inquiry will be chaired by Dame Deirdre Hine, former Chief Medical Officer for Wales.

I have also appointed the following three persons to serve on the inquiry panel:

Dr Jocelyn Cornwell, an independent healthcare consultant; Mrs Eleanor Hayes, former Director of Nursing and Governance at Belfast City Hospital Trust and Green Park Hospitals Trust; and Professor Robert Stout, formerly Professor of Geriatric Medicine at Queen's University of Belfast, Dean of QUB Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, and Director of Research and Development for Northern Ireland Health and Social Care.

The Terms of Reference, which I have agreed with the Chairperson of the inquiry, are as follows.

- 1 The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has ordered that a public inquiry be conducted into the outbreak of Clostridium difficile infection that occurred in Northern Health and Social Care hospitals between 16 June 2007 and 31 August 2008.

- 2 The purpose of the inquiry is:

- (1) to establish how many deaths occurred in Northern Health and Social Care Trust hospitals during the outbreak, for which Clostridium difficile was the underlying cause of death, or was a condition contributing to death;

and

- (2) to examine and report on the experiences of patients and others who were affected directly by the outbreak, and to make recommendations accordingly.

- 3 The inquiry will be conducted under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005.

- 4 The inquiry panel should report to the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, within twelve months of beginning the inquiry, unless otherwise determined by the Minister.



# **Committee Stages**



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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

11 March 2009

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### EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

#### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)

Mrs Mary Bradley

Mr Tom Elliott

Mr Trevor Lunn

Mr Nelson McCausland

Mr Basil McCrea

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr John O'Dowd

Michelle O'Neill

#### Witnesses:

Dr Evelyn Dermott	} Governing Bodies Association
Mr Brett Lockhart	
Mr Finbar McCallion	

Mr Shane McBrien	} Northern Ireland Voluntary Grammar Schools' Bursars Association
Mr Stephen McConnell	
Mr John Robinson	

Mr John McGrath	} Department of Education
Mr Chris Stewart	
Ms Eve Stewart	

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** You are very welcome. However, I am afraid that I must vacate the Chair and hand over to Mr McCausland.

*(The Acting Chairperson [Mr McCausland] in the Chair)*

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr McCausland):** I welcome the representatives of the Governing Bodies Association. I remind members that four additional stakeholder responses have been added to the papers for today's evidence session. There is also a spreadsheet, which groups stakeholders' comments by clause or schedule. It is an interim version, but it comprises the most substantial responses that have been received to date. Members will be provided with an updated version as soon as possible.

I will now hand over to Dr Evelyn Dermott, Mr Brett Lockhart and Mr Finbar McCallion. You will have 10 minutes to make your presentation and then we will move into questions.

**Dr Evelyn Dermott (Governing Bodies Association):** Thank you for your invitation to present the Governing Bodies Association's (GBA) position on the Education Bill to the Committee. As members know, we have expressed grave concerns about several aspects of the proposed legislation in meetings with departmental officials and in correspondence with the Minister. We are pleased to have this opportunity to present our concerns to the Committee.

I trust that members have been provided with copies of our written submission and the correspondence between the GBA and the Minister. As time is limited, I will not go through the whole submission paragraph by paragraph; however, I will group the paragraphs and tell you which ones I am speaking to. I hope that that is acceptable.

I will begin with paragraphs 1 to 4. The main purpose of the Education Bill is to set up the education and skills authority (ESA). That body will become the largest education authority in western Europe. It will be an all-powerful controller of every aspect of schools provision in Northern Ireland, and so, it cannot but become a huge and enormously expensive bureaucracy. The original aims of education reform, which we supported, were to reduce bureaucracy, release additional funds for services and develop targeted support for schools. We still want to support those aims. However, the proposals for the ESA indicate that it will be an enormous and costly bureaucratic controlling body, which will have ultimate responsibility for all significant decisions on the running of schools.

The GBA is concerned that the ESA, as outlined in the Bill, will, inevitably, become an ever-growing bureaucracy, with no restriction on the proportion of the education budget that it can accrue unto itself. Among other things, it will be the employer of all staff and the sole procurement authority. It will have powers to appoint, remove and replace governors. It will standardise the schemes of management of our schools, and it will determine the precise role of every school through area planning. In contrast to that all-empowering body, the GBA would like to see an ESA that would enable, facilitate and support — not control.

Paragraphs 5 to 10 make it clear that the ESA will be the employer of every person involved in education. Staff will be employed in our schools, not by our schools. All attendant responsibilities will, therefore, rest with this remote juggernaut organisation.

We have expressed grave concerns regarding that aspect to the Minister. In her reply, the Minister has given us assurances for which the Bill provides no

statutory basis, and that was the bottom line of our concern. She said that some schools may wish to be responsible for all employment matters; but there are no clauses in the Bill to match that statement. We submit, therefore, that clause 3(1) be amended as suggested in paragraphs 8 and 10 of our submission. Our proposed amendment would mean that the schools that did not wish to assume responsibility for employment would have those responsibilities assumed by the ESA. However, a board of governors that chose to do so could continue to act as employer subject to the normal strictures of employment law.

Paragraphs 11 to 13 deal with the principle of autonomy and protection of the ethos of our schools, which, as you know, we hold dear. The GBA maintains that the principle of autonomy and protecting the ethos of schools should be enshrined in law. Ethos-protection provisions are included in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, and there is no reason, in principle, why ethos protection could not be included in the Bill.

The GBA wishes to have those principles as rights within law. We cannot be satisfied with non-binding intentions, such as those expressed in the Minister's correspondence. The GBA submits that if the Minister and the Department are genuinely committed to preserving ethos and maximising autonomy in school governance, the present legislative model will require an amendment. It could be done.

Paragraphs 14 to 22 refer to school governance and management, which also come into the Bill. They are areas of great concern. As the Bill is drafted, the powers of the ESA will not only allow regulation of membership of boards of governors, it will allow total control over their procedures to control school schemes of management. We consider that that is excessively bureaucratic and will give power to intervene in all aspects of school management to an unprecedented degree. Again, the Minister's written sentiments are contrary to the Bill. I refer members to paragraphs 17 and 18 of our submission. Regardless of whether it is the desire of the Minister, the Bill allows intervention in school management to an unacceptable level.

Paragraphs 20 and 21 also deal with governance. The ESA will have powers to intervene if it decides that a school is underperforming. We submit that the need for the centralised intervention in school governance must be predicated on the objectively verifiable and continuing need for that intervention.

I remind the Committee and everyone who is interested in education that good schools and school improvement come about by good leadership and inspired teaching, not by an overwhelming bureaucracy.

The ESA, therefore, should not be given the powers of an inspectorate. Our submission suggests that relevant clauses be aligned with the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 so that such powers reside with the Department of Education, not with the ESA. That would be much more appropriate.

The GBA has seen no compelling argument as to why governance-oversight arrangements that apply in England and Wales cannot also be appropriate in Northern Ireland. We invite the Committee to reflect on the comparative bureaucratic and resource costs involved in the GB scheme as opposed to those that will arise from those that are proposed in the Education Bill.

**The Acting Chairperson:** Has the GBA met with Department of Education officials? The Minister's letter of 24 February 2009 made that suggestion.

**Dr Dermott:** We declined that invitation.

**The Acting Chairperson:** Was there a reason for that?

**Dr Dermott:** The reason was to do with time.

**Mr Finbar McCallion (Governing Bodies Association):** There was also an issue in that the Minister was implying that we did not understand the Bill, and that her officials would explain it to us. We had already had discussions with the officials, who explained the Bill to us and told us that the ESA would be the employer of all teachers. It seemed strange to go back and be told the same thing again.

**The Acting Chairperson:** On the basis of clause 8(2), the Department of Education states:

"The ESA may not lawfully refuse to put into effect any proper decision of a board of governors on employment matters."

If model employment schemes and the associated guidance were to set that out clearly — along with other points that you consider need to be clarified — and if those were subject to full consultation with submitting authorities, possibly with an independent appeals system and/or subject to Assembly regulation and control of ESA guidance and model schemes, would some of your key concerns be removed?

**Mr Brett Lockhart (Governing Bodies Association):** There is no doubt that the legislation expresses a desire to retain the principle of accountable autonomy and that the structures and the architecture of the legislation are such that the ESA will try to give effect to the decisions that are made. The concern is that issues of conflict will cause a problem. When such issues arise, a school takes its own decision. It must comply with the law, and if it does not, it must face the consequences. Schools protect and guard their own ethos, and they, ultimately, make the decisions.

If there were a tribunal, there would be a question about who the respondent would be: the answer is that it would be the ESA, because it would be the employer. A school may have all the schemes that it wants, and the ESA may say that it will give effect to the school's desires, but the retention of discretion remains with the ESA. If there were a major issue in a school and a teacher were sacked, the ESA would defend that decision. The ESA, for all its desire to maintain ethos, will be a huge bureaucratic organisation that will not, with the best will in the world, do that in the way that schools are able to do.

For example, in the 1930s, the Protestant Churches decided that they could entrust the control of their schools to the state. All sorts of promises were offered, and the Churches accepted them. For years, Protestant ministers had *ex officio* positions in controlled schools. Recently, the Transferor Representatives' Council, which is the representative body for the Churches in those schools, was informed that they can no longer have *ex officio* positions because that would be in breach of equality legislation. The *ex officio* positions were removed from Stranmillis University College because it was decided that that was in breach of equality legislation.

A plethora of instances and opportunities exist for debate and disagreement on what is stated in the Human Rights Act 1998 or in equality legislation, and on the obligations for schools. The ESA will be the body that has to defend that. With the best will in the world, that will not happen. Realistically, schools must defend their position. They have done so successfully for generations, but someone has now decided that he or she has a much better idea. The opportunities for dispute are legion, and the idea that the ESA will somehow be able to take on board each and every ethos and represent them in other jurisdictions and forums is fanciful.

**Mr Lunn:** You said that the ESA will become a monolithic structure, and that it will be costly, overly bureaucratic, and totally controlling. Setting aside the element of control, on what do you base your assertion that it will be costly?

**Dr Dermott:** It is perfectly simple: the amount of work that it will have to do will mean that it will have to employ a legion of people.

**Mr Lunn:** Is that similar to the present situation with the boards? The ESA is intended to save money: how did you assess that it would cost more?

**Mr McCallion:** One problem with the ESA is that the Bill places no financial control on it. In paragraph 6.14 of his report, Professor Bain highlighted that school boards of governors in Northern Ireland receive 62% of the education budget to manage their schools, whereas schools in England typically receive more

than 80%. Is that because the English are more generous? No; it is because the law in England states that local education authorities (LEAs) must drive up the percentage of money that goes directly to schools. The Education Bill does not contain such a provision and, therefore, the ESA, by its nature, must acquire the money slowly.

We are also concerned about the situation of primary schools in Northern Ireland. The amounts of money received pupil in Northern Ireland and Wales are similar, yet the amount that goes to each primary school here is £500 less than in Wales. It is not that the Welsh are less generous, but that the bureaucracy in Wales squeezed the money out into the schools. The problem for voluntary grammar schools is that when we dealt with the Department in the past, we managed to get about 90% of our budget, because the Department did not hoard the money. The difficulty with the boards is that they tended to expand their facilities and services.

Almost 10% of Northern Ireland's Budget is earmarked for particular issues, which is a much higher figure than Congress in America is complaining about. Northern Ireland has an enormous number of issues for which funding has been earmarked, and the problem is that those issues are difficult to control. At present, local people can complain to the boards, but the ESA will be a much more centralised and centralising organisation. People who live in Armagh can get in touch with the chief officer of the Southern Board, as some members have probably done. You also know where to find Barry Mulholland of the Western Board. However, what will happen when there is one central board, regardless of where the ESA may be located?

People are able to reach the boards because their councillors talk to them monthly or even weekly. I sat on the Belfast Board, and I know the amount of pushing and shoving that goes on between boards and councillors. However, even with that, the boards took too much money. The review of public administration (RPA) was intended to address that problem.

The problem for us is that we are going into a scheme, under RPA, which is intended to save money. However, there is nothing in the Bill stating how the money will be saved or specifying the percentage of money that should be used by the ESA. I do not mind whether it is 5% or 10 %, but a percentage must be fixed. As the Bill does not fix a percentage, it is likely that when we return in two or three years' time we may discover that the ESA is spending 30% of the money, and we will be told that that is a success.

**Mr Lunn:** Perhaps we can take up that point: you certainly made it forcefully. However, it is only your opinion that the ESA will be monolithic, huge and

expensive: you have no calculations to prove that. You have an impression that that will be the case as, in fairness, do many others. However the ESA has calculated that it will make savings; not more expense.

**Mr McCallion:** I think that their savings are based on the expenditure of the boards. One needs to compare those savings with what is happening elsewhere in, for example, GB. In the Republic of Ireland, the Committee on Education and Science takes a lower percentage of the budget than bureaucracy in Northern Ireland.

We have been frightened. There are currently five chief officers of the boards plus the head of the CCMS. Initial plans for the ESA proposed that there should be eight such people, as well as a chief officer of the ESA, which makes nine, plus one for the Library Authority. Therefore, six people would be replaced by nine, or 10, depending on what way it worked out.

Perhaps that was a mistake, and perhaps it has been changed. However, there is vigilance. Our fear is that the Bill does not provide for that. If six chief officers did the job previously, then having nine — which seems a lot — or even eight, seven or six seems like too many if one is trying to save money.

**Mr Lunn:** You have already mentioned your concerns about employment rules and the fact that the ESA will be the ultimate employer. The Department's response to your submission contradicts everything you say. Nelson has already mentioned the key point:

"The ESA may not lawfully refuse to put into effect any proper decision of a board of governors on employment matters."

It also states:

"However, the proposed arrangements do not involve any real or practical loss of autonomy, as boards of governors will remain responsible for the exercise of employment functions within their schools, and will take employment decisions the ESA will be under a legal duty to put into effect."

I know that your response will be that it does not say that in the Bill.

**Mr Lockhart:** Of course; it does not.

**Mr Lunn:** The Department's view is that that is already provided for in the education Orders that the Bill supplements. There is a clear difference of opinion.

**Mr Lockhart:** The fact is that the Bill has been looked at by all sorts of lawyers. I have not found any of them who take a different view to mine; that the ESA will be the ultimate employer and that it will be charged with legal responsibility.

Let us try to be more practical about the matter: is it possible that there will disagreement about what is lawful? Is it possible that the ESA will have a dispute with a Catholic school about upholding its ethos and about whether it is lawful that a teacher must subscribe to that ethos? Will there be an adoption-agency issue writ large in the school system, in which the Government

simply direct that schools must comply with the law and have no obligation to maintain rights of conscience?

Undoubtedly, there will be issues in which there is conflict of rights between the right to religious expression, the right to education, and the requirement to enforce the law. That is how lawyers make their money. Essentially, that is what they must interpret. The fact is that there is a wealth of issues on which there will be conflict. The ESA might say that it can take certain actions because the law is clear; however, someone else might say that the Human Rights Act 1998 is clear and that, therefore, the ESA cannot take that action. That is where conflict will arise.

**Mr Lunn:** That could be the case if the ESA had never been —

**Mr Lockhart:** The problem is who will preserve the ethos of schools. That is the point. The ESA will be a large, monolithic, bureaucratic organisation that has no particular remit to understand or stand for the ethos of schools.

**Mr Lunn:** Boards of governors will retain the ethos of their schools.

**Mr Lockhart:** Board of governors will not have that power when it comes to an issue that is before a tribunal, or when making a decision. The ESA must implement subject to its interpretation of the law. That is the problem: it will be the ESA's interpretation of the law. There is room for debate and disagreement. Boards of governors can say that they are sorry, that there is a grey area, and that they take a particular view because it is more consistent with their ethos.

**Mr Lunn:** That is what the law is about.

**Mr Lockhart:** Exactly; that is why we want it in the Bill. The ultimate decision should be that of boards of governors. If they are wrong, they will take the hit; however, they will stand for their ethos.

**The Acting Chairperson:** We have covered that issue as far as possible. Basil and John have both indicated that they want to ask questions. Before we move on too far, I want ask my second question again. Although I got a response, I would like a clear yes or no answer. On the basis of clause 8(2), the Department of Education states that: "The ESA may not lawfully refuse to put into effect any proper decision of a board of governors on employment matters."

If model employment schemes and the associated guidance, set that out clearly, and you get clarification of some of the other points, and if that were subject to full consultation with the submitting authorities — and possibly an independent appeals system — and/or subject to regulation and control by the Assembly of ESA guidance and model schemes, would those caveats remove some of your key concerns in that area?

**Mr Lockhart:** It would remove some of them, but not all of them. It would also establish an excessively bureaucratic structure. It would introduce a level of bureaucracy into the decision-making process, and that would make the process very difficult for the ESA and schools. I understand the desires and concerns involved. In most instances, there will not be a problem. However, I am concerned about the unintended and unexpected consequences that will inevitably arise.

Yes, there are various procedures in place that could ameliorate and mitigate that particular problem. However, a huge amount of bureaucracy would be involved, and, ultimately, it is still the ESA's view that must prevail because it is, legally, the employer. Boards of governors could potentially challenge the ESA on the decisions it makes, or on its refusal to implement a decision that the board of governors wanted to make because it says that it is not in accordance with the law.

**The Acting Chairperson:** Do you at least accept that there are mechanisms that would address some of those concerns?

**Mr Lockhart:** Why are we introducing those levels of structures into what should really be a reasonably straightforward system, which works well at the moment? The proposal would introduce a Byzantine complexity into the system, and that is completely unnecessary.

**The Acting Chairperson:** I just wanted to get some clarity on mechanisms that would address those concerns.

**Mr McCallion:** I would like to comment on the matter from an educational viewpoint. All over western Europe, the argument has been that we need to improve education. A major way to do that is to delegate power to the boards of governors. However, what we are seeing here is drawing power away from boards of governors. The power is going in the wrong direction. Sometimes, it is not the change that matters, but the direction of change. This Bill is sending out a signal that the really important decisions should not be made by boards of governors, parents, pupils and schools; rather they should be made centrally and involve bureaucracy. That is the risk that is being run.

**Mr B McCrea:** It is a pleasure to see such an eminent QC cross-examine the Committee. *[Laughter.]* You might help us, since we have the experience here. Prior to this meeting, I expressed concern about the sugar-coated words, assurances and interpretations being offered as regards the Bill.

**Mr Elliott:** You are not suggesting that it is bluff, are you?

**Mr B McCrea:** I could not possibly use those words. I am interested in how important it is that the necessary provisions are written into the primary legislation, and

how much can we rely upon guidance, interpretation, notes and such like. If something is in the Bill, is that important; and if it is not in the Bill, is that important?

**Mr Lockhart:** As a lawyer, my first instinct is to look to the primary legislation; the statute. I would be looking to see who has legal responsibility. I have mentioned the TRC as an example, but I am afraid that what I term goodwill assurances — perhaps, more pejoratively, blandishments — promises, even codes of practice and guidelines may all be very interesting in a judicial review, because they may be a relevant consideration when it comes to making a decision. However, what gives comfort to the people involved is being able to refer to the primary legislation. For example, I see clause 3, which means every member of staff, and I can see that it affects not just teachers, but cleaners and ancillary staff — basically, anyone who is employed by schools.

I am from Methodist College, and there is also the Methodist College Preparatory School. As I understand it, there is a move now to do away entirely with any subvention to the preparatory schools, yet the ESA will be the employer. The message seems to be, folks, you are going to have to raise all the money and be responsible for it, but we will be the employer of all your staff and we will make the ultimate decisions.

Those are genuine concerns. If the matter is not written into primary legislation, it will be of less legal benefit. The fact that boards of governors can, ultimately, make decisions provides protection.

**Mr B McCrea:** I want to tease that matter out, because there has been discussion about clause 3(1) and 3(2)(b), which refers to persons employed by the ESA. If the ESA holds the contract of employment, can a school's board of governors make appointments and dismissals?

**Mr Lockhart:** I am sure that their views will be considered in almost every case. However, at the moment, an inversion is taking place. I do not think that boards of governors will attend tribunals to deal with cases, because a barrister from the ESA, which is the employer, will deal with the matter. That is important, because the school's reputation is on the line. A tribunal is a public forum, and the ESA, as the employer, will represent the school at it. The school will be under no legal obligation to attend, except in an assisting capacity.

Basil asked about staff appointments. As the employer, the ESA might give effect to the decisions that schools make. As I understand it, when a school makes an appointment a representative from the Department of Education attends. That system works well; why invert it? Although the ESA will give effect to lawful employment decisions, the school, in effect, shoulders the legal responsibility. The proposals do

not comfort schools sufficiently. Why do we need to change the process?

Ten or 15 years ago, many schools — mostly in the controlled sector — had problems managing employment issues; they needed the positive support that the ESA will provide. However, many schools across the spectrum, such as voluntary Catholic schools and voluntary grammar schools, have managed such matters well for many years. Those schools regard that as the key to protecting and maintaining their ethos.

**Mr B McCrea:** I have concerns about many issues in the Bill. Is the employment of staff a central tenet of the argument or a peripheral issue? Will it be fine 95% of the time?

**Mr McCallion:** It is absolutely central. It is an essential part of the proposal and is typical of education in the rest of these islands. In Britain, when a school is under pressure and decides to reform and to become a city academy, what do the Government do? They take the school out of the control of the local education authority and appoint a board of governors that is responsible for the school. Such a process transforms schools.

We could debate the merits of the city academy model; however, it significantly transforms schools in Britain. The key is to give power to boards of governors — it is up to them whether they want to cede it. However, that arrangement ensures that boards of governors, principals and teachers know that they work for a school. The alternative is the Soviet Union model: school 197. What is the difference between school 197 and school 198? It is not the management, because that is controlled centrally. We are moving towards a centralised model.

We are unique; we are the only people in western Europe to go that way. We are waving people goodbye on the train as they all go the other way. It is quite odd.

**Mr B McCrea:** I wonder, Finbar, whether I could have that quote. School 197? Is that on the Limestone Road?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Thank you for your presentation. I too am aware of Brett's legal capabilities, so I will not cross him. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lockhart:** I have respect for you, too, John.

**Mr O'Dowd:** He was on our side last time, I am glad to say. What is your definition of accountable autonomy?

**Mr Lockhart:** Is it an oxymoron? It is an interesting phrase that conjures up all sorts of ideas. Accountable autonomy is provided for in existing legislation. Boards of governors cannot act outside the law; that tension already exists in the system. The Bill will simply invert that and take away the existing powers of boards of

governors. They will still have some powers, but, essentially, the Bill changes things round. The emphasis will be on the ESA rather than on boards of governors.

At present, the boards hold things in tension, and both sides must consult with each other. However, the situation will be inverted so that the ESA has the whip hand — the primary legal responsibility. I am concerned about all the promises that have been made, John. On 95% of occasions, things will be fine; there will not be a problem, because people will learn how to get along. Problems will arise when conflicts come along.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am concerned that you mean independence.

**Mr Lockhart:** No; that is not the case.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am concerned that a group of schools seeks public funds but does not want public accountability. In the past financial year, voluntary grammar schools received £209,430,734 in public funds for revenue; for capital, they received £30,744,507. That is all public money. To whom should those schools be accountable? The ESA is the body to which all schools that receive public funds should be accountable, but there should be a working relationship with the schools. I agree with you: the boards of governors are responsible for raising standards in schools. However, like any other recipient of public money, they must have mechanisms that can plot their accountability through the ESA and the Department — and this Committee. We will have a role.

**Mr Lockhart:** There are two points: first, the record of virtually all voluntary schools in managing budgets and ensuring value for money is extremely good; secondly, as I said, accountable autonomy already exists. The voluntary schools are already constrained by regulations and requirements on how they use that money. The proposed change will put the emphasis on the centralised body as opposed to the boards of governors. If that comes about, it will cause problems.

I do not subscribe to the view that, as recipients of large amounts of public money, boards of governors of voluntary schools should not be accountable for the money that they receive. They are already accountable. To centralise accountability is fine; but the powers of boards of governors should not be taken away. I tell you now that as the decades pass, the nature of those schools will be changed as a result. That concerns me, because those schools have been successful — leaving aside the issue of the transfer test for the moment.

**Mr McCallion:** I will give members an example. Let us suppose that an Irish-medium school that believes in immersion in Irish appoints a member of staff under ESA regulations. What would happen if that teacher said that they did not believe in the immersion teaching of Irish and that children had the right to be taught in

English? As the employer, the ESA could not argue that case in court, because the teacher's lawyers would say that all other teachers in Northern Ireland must teach through English. That would create a tension. I do not know how such a case would be resolved, since the teacher who took the job would have known what was required. Our concerns could easily be portrayed as the grammar schools looking after themselves; however, it could affect all schools.

I have sat on boards of governors of controlled schools, and we have fumed and shouted and given off about the board officers arriving and telling us what to do. Our argument was that we had a school of 1,000 pupils so we knew what we were going to do. This mammy-knows-best, or granny-knows-best or we will put you under our thumb and you will do what we tell you approach is not on. It is very difficult to encourage school governors to raise the standards in their schools with such an attitude being taken. Set them free.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Fortunately, not even Mr Lockhart could defend that case. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McCallion:** Do not be so sure. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr O'Dowd:** Are there any legal barriers to the representation of schools at tribunals?

**Mr Lockhart:** Why would schools be represented?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Therefore there is no legal barrier to schools' representation?

**Mr Lockhart:** There is nothing in the legislation that says that they cannot be represented. What rights of locus standi have schools? What rights do they have to appear? Who is the employer? It is the ESA: what would a school be doing there?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Nevertheless, there is no legal barrier to their appearing.

**Mr Lockhart:** A school could attend the tribunal as a friend.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Come on now, Brett.

**Mr B McCrea:** That would create work and money for barristers. Do not complain.

**Mr McCallion:** Let me draw that out. I have sat in tribunals at which the CCMS held a different view from the board of governors of a Catholic maintained school. Such tension is pretty fierce, and it does not disappear when the tribunal is over; the school remembers what happened. Boards of governors are made up of willing volunteers; we have thousands of them in Northern Ireland. Could we not trust them and give them a bit of space?

**Miss McIlveen:** Thank you for your presentation. I am concerned but not surprised that there is little discussion between you and the Department on those

issues. I hope that that applies only to those issues and that other topics are fully discussed.

**Dr Dermott:** We have had discussions with the Department. As Mr McCallion explained earlier, we felt that if we took up the most recent invitation, we would merely be repeating discussions that we had already had.

Is that what concerns you?

**Miss McIlveen:** Yes. I am concerned that things had got to the stage where —

**Dr Dermott:** We had already ploughed and harrowed that ground.

**Miss McIlveen:** We are now at a stage where you submit a paper and we receive a paper from the Department asking us to get clarification on issues that you have raised. Most of what interests me has already been dealt with, so I am not going to revisit it.

I wish to address the issues of ethos and employment in the Department's submission. It seems that the Department is unclear about which provisions of anti-discrimination or fair employment legislation you suggest ought not to apply in schools.

**Mr Lockhart:** All such legislation will apply to schools. In the Republic, schools are protected by section 37(1) of the Employment Equality Act 1998:

"A religious, educational or medical institution which is under the direction or control of a body established for religious purposes or whose objectives include the provision of services ... which promotes certain religious values shall not be taken to discriminate against a person for the purposes of this Part ... — if

(a) it gives more favourable treatment, on the religion ground, to an employee or a prospective employee ... where it is reasonable to do so in order to maintain the religious ethos of the institution ..."

That is written into employment law in the Republic to allow schools to protect their ethos.

The UK legislation is much more fluid, and it is extremely difficult to balance the various rights. Two years ago, for instance, a major dispute arose between the Catholic Church and the Government over the issue of adoption agencies, as the Church and other agencies wanted an exemption. The Church said that it would refer gay couples to another agency but that in conscience it could not entrust children to them. The Government refused to allow that, saying that it was not acceptable. There was an issue about whether, on a fact-specific basis, Church adoption agencies could write appropriate stipulations into their constitutions. It is all in a state of flux. The result has been that quite a few Catholic adoption agencies that dealt with the most disadvantaged children in England have had to close.

Northern Ireland has civil partnership legislation. A Catholic school — and perhaps other schools — might say that civil partnership causes a problem and that

its aims, values and ethos make it impossible for it to have a teacher who is in such a partnership.

I am simply giving civil partnerships as an example. The ESA might regret having to tell a school that it was acting outside the law, but it would have to do so. A school may be forced to act against its ethos, but tough; that is the law. The board of governors might think that, under the provisions of freedom for religious expression in the Human Rights Act 1998, there is room for debate and that the matter is fact-specific enough to allow the board to make a case. However, the ESA would say that, ultimately, it takes the decisions and it does not think that the school is acting within the law.

That may not be the best example; nevertheless, there are issues of religious conscience. For example, if a sex education code of practice were introduced for the whole of the UK that certain Churches said they did not want, the Government would say that it must be taught in all schools because it is in legislation. That is the kind of conscience issue that may come up.

Who will be the defender of a school's ethos in that case? The ESA will simply say that its interpretation of the law is different. That is the problem. I am using that simply as an example.

**Mr McCallion:** There was a rumpus when a British Airways staff member wore a crucifix in public. Did it do the individual any good? Did it do the airline any good? Did it do the lawyers any good — yes, it did; they made a great deal of money.

**Mr B McCrea:** They always do.

**Mr McCallion:** However, it did not do anybody else good. It did not do community relationships in that organisation any good either, as it created tension between Sikhs and born-again Christians who could see no reason why they should not be allowed to wear the cross. At present, such tensions as exist in schools are local problems, and the people who should resolve them are the boards of governors.

**The Acting Chairperson:** I think that we have covered the issues thoroughly. Thank you for your presentation.

**Dr Dermott:** Thank you for listening to us and for your questions. I also thank my colleagues for their constructive answers.

We support an administrative rationalisation, but we oppose the creation of an all-powerful controller. We seek amendments to the Bill on the employment of staff, the protection of ethos, and school governance management. We would also like responsibility for procurement to rest with boards of governors, and an aspiration towards 90% of the education budget going to schools not into bureaucracy.

**The Acting Chairperson:** I welcome Stephen McConnell, the chairman of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Grammar Schools Bursars' Association (NIVGSBA); John Robinson, the vice-chairman; and Shane McBrien who is a committee member and bursar of St Malachy's College. There will be 10 minutes for your presentation, gentlemen, and then we will ask questions.

**Mr Stephen McConnell (Northern Ireland Voluntary Grammar Schools Bursars' Association):** On behalf of our association, I thank the Committee for affording us this opportunity to speak about the Education Bill.

The association represents bursars in 51 voluntary grammar schools throughout Northern Ireland. In those schools, the bursar is normally responsible to the governing body for the conduct of their school's financial affairs, business management and for the material state of the premises and grounds. Bursars are professionals who usually have qualifications in management, accountancy and/or law. A bursar has many responsibilities, but, perhaps above all, the bursar's role in voluntary schools is an enabling one that allows the school to carry out its function of educating children.

From the outset, I must say that the association is in favour of achieving greater efficiencies in the education sector and of improving education outcomes. Today's presentation is more than narrow self-interest because our association has been assured that the role of bursar will continue in some shape or form within the ESA framework. Nevertheless, there are aspects of the proposed Education Bill that we believe will lead to greater inefficiencies and therefore be counterproductive.

Of the 51 voluntary grammar schools, 29 are owned and governed by the trustees of the Catholic Church; the remaining 22 are owned by their own trustees and run by boards of governors. Most, if not all, of those schools are long established and have an enviable record of education outcomes over many years.

The chief characteristics of the voluntary schools are: trustees own the land and buildings; the trustees' responsibilities are usually set down in a foundation deed of trust, which sets out the aims of the school and the obligations that fall on the trustee governors; schools' recurrent funding comes directly from, and therefore they are directly accountable to, the Department of Education — there is no intermediate body; their governing bodies employ all members of staff, and they are responsible for recruiting, deploying, managing and paying all those who work for the school; governing bodies are responsible for schools' financial management; and, in addition to the duties laid down in their foundation documents,

schools are charged with carrying out exactly the same statutory duties and responsibilities as every other grant-aided school.

The present system provides clear lines of responsibility and accountability for the delivery of education to a high standard and to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy between funder and provider. Over the many years of their existence, the schools have demonstrated that they can use public funds effectively and efficiently for the benefit of their pupils.

The original proposals in the review of public administration suggested that the relationship between schools and the ESA should be characterised by maximised supported autonomy. Furthermore, it said that the new arrangements must have sufficient flexibility to accommodate schools that wish to avail themselves of differing degrees of autonomy. The RPA highlighted the importance of maximising schools' autonomy, whereas, in contrast, the proposed Education Bill will reduce the autonomy of voluntary schools by transferring significant control to a centralised body.

By establishing the ESA, the Education Bill will remove the employing-authority role from boards of governors; undermine the voluntary principle of school governance, due to the command-and-control structure proposed by the ESA; introduce a one-size-fits-all education system; and contradict developments in the UK, where the Government's stated desire is that there should be diversity of school-management structures, and where the focus is on maximising autonomy at local level in schools, as evidenced in the growth of city technology schools, trust schools and city academies.

One of the key factors enabling voluntary schools to develop and maintain a distinctive ethos is the right of boards of governors, as the employing authority, to employ, promote, discipline and carry out employment-law functions for their staff within a policy framework set by the boards.

As members heard earlier, one of the key roles proposed for the ESA is underscored in clause 3, which states that the ESA will employ all staff in grant-aided schools. Contracts of employment for all staff in voluntary schools are at present with the board of governors of each school. That means that board members are responsible for the key decisions of appointing and dismissing staff, who are selected in accordance with the ethos of the school, which may be academic or linked to a particular religious denomination.

Staff have an affinity with and loyalty to their schools, the values, ethos and traditions of which they seek to uphold. However, boards of governors will no longer be considered the employer if contractual responsibility for all staff lies with the ESA and not

with boards of governors. Under the legislation, the ESA as employer could redeploy staff between institutions, and that may result in staff having no affinity with or loyalty to a particular school. Staff may not, therefore, have the same motivation to drive up standards of attainment or to enforce discipline as they do at present.

Clause 4 contains provisions for the preparation of employment schemes for all grant-aided schools; those schemes must be approved by the ESA under clause 6. If a scheme is not considered to be in line with the guidance issued by the ESA, that body has, under clause 6(2)(a) the reserved power to make an employment scheme for the school, which:

“shall be treated for all purposes as if it had been prepared by the submitting authority of the school”.

We believe that that is unduly prescriptive and dictatorial and further dilutes the autonomy of boards of governors.

All staff will have a standard contract of employment with the ESA, and because they will have no affinity with a body employing more than 50,000 staff, they will carry out only those duties outlined in their standard terms and conditions of employment. For example, it may be the case that staff will no longer voluntarily assist with sporting activities or organised school trips. It is therefore imperative that voluntary schools' boards of governors have the right to retain staff contracts of employment and remain the employing authority. It is accepted, however, that some schools may wish to have the ESA as employer while others may wish it to provide a supporting role in assisting with the drawing up of contractual terms and providing legal advice as and when required.

It is essential that the Bill be amended to give boards of governors the crucial right of employing and managing staff, with the ESA being given a supportive function in this context if required. We also believe that there has been a serious underestimation of the challenges that lie ahead should the ESA take control of the voluntary sector.

Although we understand that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) are not strictly applicable in this instance, in practice, the ESA, as the employing authority, would take over the employees from the various current employers under their existing terms and conditions of employment. The TUPE regulations preserve employees' terms and conditions when a business or undertaking is transferred to a new employer. The new employer takes over the contracts of employment of all employees who were employed at the undertaking immediately before the transfer. The new employer takes over all rights and obligations arising from those contracts of employment and any collective

agreements made on behalf of the employees that were enforced immediately before the transfer.

All non-teaching and support staff in the voluntary sector have widely differing roles and responsibilities. Transferring all those staff to one employer could leave the ESA open to a raft of legal challenges, as staff working under one employer will compare the differing terms and conditions of employment throughout the sector. That will apply equally to teaching staff who, when under one employer, will expect to be awarded the same responsibility points as staff of other schools carrying out similar duties. As each voluntary school is autonomous, there is little read-across of salary and conditions of service, which will be difficult to administer for the new umbrella organisation. It is very likely that that will raise issues of equality and job evaluation when the new agency is only bedding in.

Key governance provisions in the Bill can be found in clauses 30 to 33. Schools will further lose their autonomy by virtue of the standardised schemes of management. Such schemes must be approved by the ESA. If a scheme is not considered to be in accordance with the guidance issued by the ESA under clause 32, the ESA can make a scheme of management that will be treated as if prepared by the submitting authority. Such a scheme will regulate the membership and procedures of boards of governors, as well as the management of schools and relations between boards of governors, principals and any other persons specified in the scheme. It is the association's opinion that that is likely to involve a prescriptive and bureaucratic model of school governance. The ESA will have the power to appoint governors as considered necessary and the power to choose community governors who may not be approved by individual boards of governors.

The key benefit of the existing model is the ability of schools to attract governors from a wide range of professional backgrounds to volunteer to serve on boards. Many such governors have a long-standing relationship with a particular school, together with specific expertise that adds greatly to the management of a school. In future, under the conditions outlined in the legislation, it is likely that the schools will have great difficulty in attracting governors with relevant experience. Governors may not give of their time and expertise freely when the main managing authority will be the ESA and when they will be required to operate within a framework of stringent rules that may not be to the best interest of individual schools.

From the outset, I wish to say that the associations and relationships that bursars of voluntary grammar schools have had with the Department of Education and its voluntary grammar finance branch, with regard to financial management and procurement, have been excellent throughout the years. All our schools are

accountable to the Department of Education, each being subject to the Department's financial auditing arrangements, and are rigorously audited annually, with the production of both internal and external audit reports prepared by independent professionals. The internal audit is carried out in order to ensure that robust systems of control and governance are in place. External audits provide assurances as to the stewardship of the funds provided by the Department and the financial stability and viability of schools.

In addition to the funds received from the Department, many voluntary schools receive additional funding from parents and benefactors. We believe that the standardisation that will inevitably result from the Education Bill will lessen the incentive to make such contributions in future. That will ultimately put an additional strain on the public purse.

A number of voluntary schools also carry out additional educational activities outside those that are directly grant-aided by the Department. Such activities generate non-public funds, which should not come under the proposed legislative framework. Although the Bill is largely silent on procurement, it is understood that when the second Bill is introduced there will be further legislation that will considerably reduce the autonomy of voluntary schools through centralising the procurement function, which could undoubtedly lead to increased costs and inefficiencies.

To allay genuine concerns about preserving the ethos of schools and maximising the autonomy of school governance, the proposed legislation must be amended. There should be no alteration of the role of boards of governors as the sole employing authorities for voluntary schools. Individual boards of governors must retain the autonomy that will allow them to make decisions that are in the best interests of their schools: that must be reflected in the legislation.

The association cannot find evidence to suggest that the proposal to enable the ESA to manage voluntary schools, as outlined in the Bill, will result in improvements to education administration and achieve better outcomes.

**The Acting Chairperson:** Thank you. You mentioned additional funding in your presentation and in your written submission. How much additional funding is received?

**Mr McConnell:** I cannot give you an exact figure for the whole of the sector. However, I can speak for my school, which receives an additional £100,000 a year for the secondary department. My school also has a preparatory department and a boarding department. The revenue generated by the boarding department is close to £750,000. We employ all the staff in the boarding department, and we manage the funds from the fees that come in from boarding pupils. We do not believe that the ESA, which would have no conduit to

those funds, should be the employer of staff that we employ by virtue of those non-public funds.

**Mr John Robinson (Northern Ireland Voluntary Grammar Schools' Bursars Association):** May I add to that? My school is Methodist College. We receive revenue in excess of £500,000 a year from parents and voluntary contributions. That money is used entirely in the secondary department and is accounted for in that department. Without it, we could not provide the services that we provide for the children who attend the school. It is very straightforward.

*(The Chairperson [Mr Storey] in the Chair)*

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** I thank Nelson McCausland for chairing the meeting in my absence.

**Miss McIlveen:** Thank you for your presentation. You made a comment about teaching staff. If I were a teacher and knew that a teacher in another school was being paid differently for doing the same job, I would be asking questions. You also talked about the organisation of trips, and so on, which might be curtailed under the ESA. As a teacher in a previous life, I know that many teachers work beyond what is in their contract. They do what they feel is necessary, and to say that they would be bound by contracts is a bit cynical.

You also said that because a voluntary school is autonomous, there is little read-across regarding salaries and conditions. Have you done any work in order to address that or to get a feel for what the differences may be?

**Mr J Robinson:** Voluntary schools are slightly different in that, as Stephen said, many have preparatory departments and boarding departments. There is more of a difference in terms and conditions than there is in pay. In our school, for example, we run janitors on a continuous rota system. I understand that that is different from almost any other school in the Province. That is one example, but terms and conditions are the key issue.

Our message is that the nature of life, and people, is that people react better when their employer is local and when they know who their employer is. I have no great issue with ensuring that staff are properly remunerated in line with that across the sector. In fact, teachers in voluntary schools are paid on exactly the same basis as those in the controlled sector, and I do not know of any exceptions to that. There may be some enhancements for the additional work that they carry out and which is line with the salary policy, but, generally, that is not a great issue.

We are saying that the change, and the move towards that change, is difficult. On the basis of many years experience as a manager outside the education sector, I believe that the key message is that people have an affinity for a local employer. The key factors are: who holds the contract, and who deals with discipline and

grievances in the normal employment relationship. The board of governors have control of those issues in voluntary grammar schools.

**Miss McIlveen:** It also involves an interpretation of how local is local. We are not talking about an organisation that is based across the water; it will be reasonably local without being located in a school.

**Mr J Robinson:** The key is that it should be in the school and in the board of governors of the school.

**Miss McIlveen:** Is your primary concern around commitments?

**Mr J Robinson:** Yes — and teaching staff. Teaching staff look to the board of governors of the school as their employer if the employment relationship is correct.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Thank you for your presentation. I also noted the issues that Michelle raised. You referred to auxiliary and support staff at your school, and I see that they are also mentioned in your letter:

“The Regulations have the effect that employees employed by their respective Board of Governors would automatically become employees of the ESA on the same terms and conditions.”

To me, that is why the ESA should be in place. Recently, the Minister diverted more than £1 million to ensure that voluntary schools' classroom assistants had the same terms and conditions as other classroom assistants. Should the Minister take that money back?

**Mr McConnell:** I do not wish to get into an argument over classroom assistants.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do — but perhaps I am being unfair to you in that sense.

The public purse was opened up and more than £1 million was taken out to ensure that staff in your schools received the same terms and conditions as other staff. Today, you are arguing that the ESA is a bad idea because all staff will be on the same terms and conditions. That is a crazy argument.

**Mr J Robinson:** The argument is about the transition and the difficulties in setting up the ESA.

**Mr O'Dowd:** A lengthy and exhaustive process of job evaluation has taken place. In the beginning, the job-evaluation process was not managed properly. When I was Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, we reported on the matter. However, the process is now in place and is ticking over. Therefore, ensuring that employees in your sector are on the same terms, grades and conditions as those in other sectors would not be a major problem.

**Mr McConnell:** In any industry, a job-evaluation process will increase costs. Therefore, that would impact on the education budget. The first job-evaluation process started a number of years ago, and there has been significant erosion in the differentials in the rates of pay between, for example, ground staff and cleaning

staff. In some schools, therefore, it is almost better to be employed as a cleaner in the afternoon than as a clerical officer. A job-evaluation exercise will be carried out for clerical staff. What will happen is that suddenly everyone's rate of pay will increase. There is no bottomless pit of money from HM Treasury. Therefore, we are being realistic in saying that the exercise will cost the Government significantly more money.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not think that that is the reason that you are arguing against it. You have the right to give that response, but I do not accept it.

**Mr J Robinson:** To add to that response, the key point is that there are differences in the job descriptions of some staff. I will give an example that applies to classroom assistants in our school. We compared their job descriptions with the job-evaluated description and found that they are virtually the same; there is no substantial difference. Therefore, our classroom assistants will be given the money when it comes through. We consulted them and told them that we hope that that will resolve the problem with terms and conditions. Let me stress that I do not think that any voluntary grammar school will ever argue about not paying their staff a proper rate for the job. However, there are differences between the schools as regards job descriptions.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Job evaluation has managed to go across five boards. It has been a very difficult process and has gone through many hoops, hurdles and mistakes. However, the process is in place now, so I assume that it can be applied to 30 voluntary grammar schools.

**Mr J Robinson:** That is exactly our point.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am surprised that you are not able to tell us how much voluntary contributions there are across the board. I can tell you how much public contributions there were last year — in the region of £250 million went into the voluntary schools. I note that your presentation states that there are clear lines of responsibility and accountability, and I think that you were referring to education and funding. What are the clear lines of financial accountability for public funds? How are you audited? Have you ever been audited by the Audit Office?

**Mr McConnell:** As I said in my presentation, we are audited annually, both internally and externally. We are audited by professional chartered accountants. We submit our annual audited accounts to the Department by 1 June each year, in line with the Treasury's Faster Closing initiative. We also have internal audits that examine the internal control systems in schools, and the Department of Education receives those internal audit reports. We constantly submit returns to the Department monitoring our financial affairs. The Department receives an initial estimate from us each year on how we will spend the money. That is reviewed

in November each year, and a further review of that is sent to the Department. The Department monitors our surpluses and deficits. If there is a surplus or deficit of more than 5%, the Department asks the board of governors in each school what they are doing about it. As far as accountability for the money that we get is concerned, we are very accountable to the Department and to the public purse.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The CCMS, the education boards, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, and so forth, have to present themselves quarterly to the Minister and explain how they are accounting for the money spent. Do the grammar schools do that?

**Mr McConnell:** We do not have to meet quarterly, but, as I explained —

**Mr O'Dowd:** When was the last time that you went before the Minister of Education to discuss your accounts?

**Mr McConnell:** We have never done so.

**Mr J Robinson:** It would not be a problem for us, but it would not be appropriate for us to do so, because we are not the proper body to meet as regards accounting for the money that goes into the voluntary grammar sector. It would have to be the GBA, or some other body, and I am unaware of the arrangements in place between that body, or individual schools, and the Department.

**Mr Elliott:** Elements of your presentation concern additional education activities outside those that are directly grant-aided by the Department. Will you elaborate on that? I understood that those took place in all schools, including schools in the controlled sector. How does that differ in the voluntary grammar sector? What are your concerns in that respect?

**Mr McConnell:** I was making reference to activities in boarding schools and preparatory schools.

**Mr Elliott:** Would it have any effect on day schools?

**Mr McConnell:** No. The only additional funds that would be applicable to day schools are the voluntary contributions from parents, which have the effect of reducing schools' deficits.

**Mr Elliott:** Are you saying that there would be an issue with staff in the respect? Or, would it be an issue because of the ESA?

**Mr J Robinson:** The issue has not been sorted out. The ESA chief executive designate has met us on a couple of occasions, and for that I thank him. We have been told that staff who fall within the educational sector will be employed by the ESA. There is a difficulty with that in that some staff will have a couple of masters. For instance, a boarding department is not that educational, and funding comes from parents towards boarding. That is one issue that needs to be resolved.

**Mr Elliott:** I have noticed a common theme among various associations that have provided evidence to us, and paragraphs 23 and 24 of your submission echo that point when you state that policy is not being reflected in the Bill. Perhaps, we should ask this of the departmental officials, but I would like you to expand on that. I know that you have limited your concerns to one point, but is that the only point that you have or is it broader?

**Mr J Robinson:** The original documentation, the policy paper and our initial meeting with people involved with the setting up of the ESA — which was some time ago — assured us that maximum autonomy would be given to the schools that could deal with it. That assured us to some extent, but it took us more towards the academy model, which is happening in England, and our own models. The Bill is a disappointment, because it seems to be prescriptive in all the areas — and certainly in employment.

We believe that there may have been some movement on the employment of staff. The Bill states clearly that staff will be employed by the ESA. We understand the need for efficiencies, and so on, but that is a fundamental change — and, as a manager, I do not believe that it is a change for the better. I am not arguing for worse terms for anyone; I am arguing, from the management perspective, that this is not the best way forward.

**Mr Lunn:** Thank you for your presentation. I want to pick up on one point, which you have highlighted in your submission. You are concerned about clause 18(1), which states:

“ESA may do anything that appears to it to be conducive or incidental to the discharge of its functions.”

Why are you so concerned about that? It comes at the end of a long list of functions and duties that are being given to the ESA. It seems like a tidying-up line to cover anything that may have been forgotten. You say that it provides all-embracing powers; it does not. The words are further qualified later in clause 18. The same words are used in clause 19, which deals with the powers of the ESA to undertake commercial activities, and it is qualified by certain restrictions. If that line were not part of the clause, would it make a difference to what the ESA can or cannot do? I do not know why you are concerned about it.

**Mr J Robinson:** Again, I refer to the submission by Mr Lockhart, and his comment about the law of unforeseen eventualities. We are concerned about the clause because it allows the ESA to make adjustments and regulations should something crop up that may not have been foreseen during the passage of the Bill. Therefore, I — not as a lawyer, but as an accountant — will find it helpful to have some qualification of the clause. You are quite right: it is a catch-all clause, and I imagine that that is why it has been written into the Bill. If I were drafting the Bill, I would do exactly the

same — I would include a clause that allows some flexibility in future rather than have to go through the churn of the legislative process all over again.

**Mr Lunn:** My guess is that there is probably a similar clause in existing legislation governing the activities of the present governing bodies — we can ask the departmental officials about that later. Have you checked that legislation, or have you just picked this clause out and said that it is appalling, and that we cannot have it in the Bill.

**Mr J Robinson:** We are dealing with, and commenting on, the legislation that is in front of us. As for other legislation, there would usually be a little more qualification.

**Mr Lunn:** Well, we are not going to agree. I just wondered why the matter was so important to you.

**The Chairperson:** Obviously, that is a concern for the Committee. Previously, we told the Department that if it is not in the legislation, we are going to have difficulty with it.

I will conclude this session by asking a question that was asked in an earlier session, and it relates to clause 8, which deals with employment schemes. If there were a system of independent appeal, or if the Assembly had the power to regulate and control the ESA guidance and model schemes, would that address some of your concerns about employment schemes and other schemes of management?

**Mr J Robinson:** Again, I agree with what Mr Lockhart said. I deal with employment law and employment issues in our school. What is being proposed would create an unwieldy bureaucratic means of dealing with the issue.

As regards schemes of management and accountability, many of our schools have schemes of management with the Department. I can speak only for myself, but I have no issue with that. Lawyers are often quoted as saying that employment law is the second most difficult area of law. We deal with that area of law, and I do not think that it would be helpful to introduce other layers of bureaucracy into the arrangement between employer and employee given that employment issues can be difficult to deal with in general.

**The Chairperson:** Stephen, Shane and John, thank you very much for your presentation. You are welcome to stay for the remainder of the meeting. I now ask the departmental officials to join us — undoubtedly, they have been imbibing all that has been said in the past hour or so.

The Department sent the Committee a response to the GBA paper, but I suspect that, after today's session, other issues will also need to be dealt with. Mr McGrath, I am sure that the Committee will agree that the paper submitted by the GBA today should be

given to you, and that we should continue to consider the issues raised in that paper, in this presentation and in the Department's response. The paper was sent yesterday, so members should have received it. John, I am in your hands.

**Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):** I am glad to be with the Committee again. Chris will lead off on the Department's response to the initial paper.

**Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education):** We welcome the opportunity to consider the presentations and hear the evidence from the Governing Bodies Association (GBA) and the Northern Ireland Voluntary Grammar Schools' Bursars Association. It is clear that we agree on a great deal and that we disagree on some fundamental points, which I want to concentrate on in my presentation.

I am conscious that the Committee is pressed for time, so my presentation will be shorter than it might otherwise have been. It is important to set the context and to remind ourselves of our aims. There, we begin to see the commonality of view between ourselves and the GBA. The RPA arrangements are based on autonomy for schools and on the aim that schools are best placed to run their own affairs but with accountability for their actions and for the educational outcomes that they produce. We intend to achieve that effect through the Bill.

I want to respond specifically to the GBA's three major areas of concern: its objection to the proposed employment arrangements; its objection to the proposed governance arrangements for schools; and comparisons with legislation in England and Wales.

The GBA has argued consistently that the employment arrangements will result in a loss of autonomy for some schools. We recognise and acknowledge the genuine sense of loss in those schools. However, the Department contends that there is no real loss of autonomy, because boards of governors will remain responsible for the exercise of employment functions and will take employment decisions that the ESA will be under a legal duty to put into effect. Our policy aim is to ensure that that degree of autonomy is available to all schools on the basis of equality, rather than to some schools on the basis of historical differences in ownership.

The GBA contends that the Bill will not have such an effect, that decision-making powers will rest with the ESA and that boards of governors will be restricted to making suggestions or requests. That is not the case. The Education Bill makes it clear that boards of governors will make decisions — which is the phraseology used in the Bill — not recommendations on employment matters. We have referred to clause 8(2) several times, and it is worth remembering its content and meaning. That clause's effect is that the

ESA may not lawfully refuse to put into effect boards of governors' proper decisions on employment matters.

Mr Lockhart spoke earlier and made a number of points to which I want to respond. His central point was that the separate employment arrangements that pertain at present somehow offer those schools a degree of freedom that they would lose under the proposed arrangements to interpret the law. As I have confessed to the Committee many times, I am not a lawyer, and I rely on legal advice. The legal advice is that I have received is different and states that schools do not enjoy that degree of freedom.

If a board of governors, in its role as employer, proposed to act outside the law, the Department would prevent that and would exercise its powers of direction. If, for some reason, the Department failed to act, in a case of unlawful dismissal, a tribunal would have the power to impose a substantial fine or to order the reinstatement of the member of staff. Those arrangements will pertain irrespective of whether we continue to have separate employers or whether the ESA becomes the single employer. That advice has been provided by the Departmental Solicitor, who is also the chairman of employment tribunals and has considerable experience in such matters.

Furthermore, the GBA suggested that it is not possible to put the proposed arrangements into effect in law. Mr Lockhart said that only the ESA would be present at employment tribunals and courts. Again, our legal advice is different and states that a court or tribunal would automatically join to the proceedings any body or person who played a part in the matter that was the subject of complaint. Therefore, the board of governors and the ESA would be represented in proceedings by order of the tribunal or the court.

The GBA argued that it is not possible to achieve the Department's desired effect in law.

However, not only is it possible — it has already been done. We have discussed schedule 2 to the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 in the Committee on several occasions. Several key points in respect of that schedule — which refers to controlled schools — are worth emphasising.

It is solely for boards of governors to determine staff complement; there is no role for the employer in that regard. It is for boards of governors to draw up and implement disciplinary rules and procedures, and the employer's role is limited to one of consultee. Boards of governors and principals — not employers — have the power to suspend staff and to end suspensions. Crucially, it is for boards of governors only to take decisions on the dismissal of staff. The only exception to that is if a member of staff becomes ineligible for employment; for example, if their registration to teach is revoked.

Those provisions demonstrate that boards of governors can, and will, be given an autonomous statutory role in employment matters, including dismissal. There are also clear and effective duties on the ESA, as the employer, to put the lawful decisions of boards of governors into effect. Schools may feel that they have a degree of freedom in how to interpret the law, but that is not the case.

The GBA has stated its opposition to the provisions in clauses 30 to 33 very clearly. Those clauses require each school to draw up a scheme of management, taking account of guidance produced by the ESA, and to submit that scheme to the ESA for approval. We find it difficult to understand the GBA's objection and, indeed, its description of the arrangements as a striking transfer of power. Grant-aided schools are publicly funded institutions that deliver a key public service. The Department contends that it is reasonable and necessary to require each school to have clear governance arrangements and to abide by them. In essence, we are saying that schools must have rules and stick to them. We do not regard that as an unreasonable requirement or a striking transfer of power.

In its paper, the GBA suggested that only failing schools should be subject to those requirements. That seems to suggest that we should have a statutory duty to bolt the stable door long after the horse has disappeared over the horizon; we do not think that that is an appropriate way forward. The legislative requirements are not new; they have been in statute since 1989. Article 9(a) to 9(d) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 requires schemes of management to be prepared and submitted to the Department for approval and contain powers for the Department to modify and impose — or default — on those schemes. The provisions in the Education Bill are very similar to those arrangements, but the approval role rests with the ESA rather than with the Department.

The GBA drew comparisons with the legislation in England and Wales and suggested that that legislation might be a better route for us to follow. There is a Chinese proverb: "be careful what you ask for — you might get it." It is worth bearing that proverb in mind when considering the relevant legislation, namely the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. That Act is more prescriptive and contains a broader range of intervention powers for local education authorities than anything that we have proposed for the education and skills authority.

The equivalent of management schemes are known as instruments of government in English legislation, the key provisions of which are section 37 and schedule 12 of the 1998 Act. Schools are required to draw up instruments of government that they must submit to local education authorities for approval. That

is very similar to the Northern Ireland provisions, but the key difference is that schools here will have more flexibility to shape their schemes. Schools in Northern Ireland can tailor their schemes of management and take account of the ESA guidance. By contrast, schools in England are legally required to draw up instruments of government in prescribed form and with no scope for variation.

I now turn to the intervention powers of local education authorities and the ESA. We have striven to maintain that the emphasis is on schools self-improving. Schools are to be supported and challenged — but not controlled — by the ESA, and the ESA's intervention powers are to be kept to a minimum. Action to raise standards and tackle underperformance will be schools-led. Following inspection, the legislation will require a school — not the ESA — to produce an action plan detailing what action that school proposes to take to address an inspection's findings.

The interventions regime under the English Act is rather different. In England, LEAs may, depending on a school's performance, issue a formal direction that requires the school to take specified actions; appoint additional governors, overriding the school's instrument of government; suspend the delegation of a school's budget; take over the role of setting a school's staffing complement; remove a governing body's right to appoint or dismiss staff; and direct a governing body to dismiss staff.

By contrast, the ESA will have no such powers; it cannot direct schools with regard to raising standards; it cannot withhold grants; it cannot interfere with a school's staff complement or the appointment of staff; neither can it direct the dismissal of staff. The strongest powers in Northern Ireland legislation, which are rather less extensive than any in England and Wales, are reserved exclusively by the Department and will not be in the hands of the ESA.

The GBA said that legislation in England and Wales is preferable to proposals in the Education Bill. However, a comparison demonstrates that the English legislation is more prescriptive; offers less flexibility to schools in determining their governance arrangements; and gives much greater powers of intervention to local education authorities than anything in current legislation or anything proposed in the Education Bill.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Chris. I am more worried about Irish blarney than Chinese proverbs. The worry, which you have heard repeated by the Committee several times and to which Trevor referred earlier, is that there is a sense that the Bill creates a catch-all scenario; provisions are made and powers are given that cover every eventuality. Organisations that have attended the Committee today, such as the Northern Ireland Voluntary Grammar Schools Bursars' Association

and the GBA, are still not convinced that the legislation will not manifest their worst-case scenarios.

For example, as regards clause 8, does the Department not feel that to allay concerns, there should be adequate provision in the legislation for an independent appeals mechanism subject to resolution, control or regulation by the Assembly? Would that be helpful?

**Mr C Stewart:** I recognise that many of the concerns of the GBA, the bursars' association and, indeed, other stakeholders' focus on the fact that much of the detail, particularly on employment arrangements, does not appear in the Bill. However, it will appear in guidance and in the schemes of employment when they are drawn up. The aim is to reduce bureaucracy and the degree of prescription in legislation. However, I understand the concern that arises when that detail is not seen in writing; it is perfectly natural to have some concern about what the content might be.

There are two possible approaches, one of which we have discussed previously in the Committee. The first is explicitly linking the role of the ESA in such matters with article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and the Department's power to direct and provide a vehicle for an aggrieved party to complain. The Department would then investigate the matter. If necessary, it would issue a direction to correct any malfeasance on the ESA's part.

The second mechanism, to which some of your questions pointed earlier, is to provide a scrutiny, challenge or overseeing role for the Assembly, and there is a way to achieve that. We could propose that that detail be contained in guidance. The alternative is to put it in subordinate legislation or regulation, which, of course, could be made subject to Assembly control and would always be subject to scrutiny by the Committee.

We have sought wherever possible to avoid doing that, because, as we have said before, the volume of education legislation is extremely large and we do our best not to add to it unnecessarily. However, if it is felt that we need to be more prescriptive and to provide more clarity in legislation rather than in guidance, there is a mechanism that allows us to do that.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Do staff in voluntary grammar schools have more or fewer employment rights now than those working in the controlled or maintained sector?

**Mr C Stewart:** I do not see how that could be.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Are there any plans to introduce independent, free-standing employment legislation to back up proposals of the education and skills authority? Is there a raft of employment legislation to which the ESA or any other body must adhere? Every time that you draft a Bill, do you have to add the employment

legislation to it? Is the ESA rewriting or adding to existing employment legislation?

**Mr C Stewart:** The answer to those questions is no.

**Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):** It is not in our power to do that. The law on employment will remain as it is now after the ESA has been set up; the ESA does not affect the legislation one way or the other.

**Mr O'Dowd:** If a voluntary grammar school's board of governors interviewed an applicant for a job for which he or she was best qualified, could the board of governors decide not to give the job to him or her because they did not like the look of that person? I am not saying that they would want to do that, but could they?

**Mr McGrath:** They should not do that.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am not suggesting that they would want to but whether they could under existing legislation.

**Mr McGrath:** The law of the land on fair employment applies to voluntary grammar schools no less or no more than it applies to controlled schools, maintained schools or any other employer.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Concerns were expressed that the ethos of a school could be undermined by the ESA's being the employing authority. However, boards of governors will conduct interviews and appoint staff, and that will not be undermined.

**Mr C Stewart:** Ethos is always subject to the law; we touched on this issue several times with the Committee. The Committee has also discussed, and expressed its views on, the exemption on teacher recruitment in the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (FETO). That is why we posed that question in response to the Governing Bodies Association paper that sought clarification on additional exemptions in respect of fair employment and equality legislation for which it appeared to be arguing. Given the existing FETO exemption, it was not clear what additional legislative requirements the association sought to have disappplied to voluntary grammar schools.

**The Chairperson:** Chris made a point earlier about the mechanisms that we could use to address those concerns, through either a direction subject to article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 or additional regulations. Would it be possible to make proposals or prepare a paper on that?

**Mr C Stewart:** As a technical challenge, it is certainly possible. We would have to seek a view from the Minister. I am not aware of any technical difficulty that would prevent such a course of action.

**The Chairperson:** I want to bring this session to a close because we have a commitment to Portadown

College, whose representatives, I am glad to say, have joined us. Will the maintained schools, controlled schools, voluntary grammar schools, integrated schools and various other types of schools in Northern Ireland have equality in the employment schemes? Once the ESA has been established, will we be able to say, without any shadow of doubt, that all schools will be administered and treated equally and that no sector will have any advantage — through any sleight-of-hand or historical accident or privileged position — over any other?

**Mr C Stewart:** I sense that you are looking for a straight answer and that answer is yes.

**Mr Lunn:** Will you comment briefly on the bursars' concern about clause 18(1)? It states that:

“ESA may do anything that appears to it to be conducive or incidental to the discharge of its functions.”

**Mr C Stewart:** On first reading, clause 18 appears to offer a degree of latitude to the ESA that might give rise to concern; however, it does not. The qualification that something must be conducive or incidental to the discharge of the ESA's functions is important. There has to be a direct link between what the ESA wants to do in the discharge of its statutory functions and the education legislation. Therefore, the clause does not allow the ESA to set up private companies that can do something that is not connected to education.

However, apart from that, it is a fairly standard provision that would routinely be inserted into legislation to establish any new non-departmental public body delivering a public service. There is an almost identically worded clause in the Libraries Bill, and, if my memory serves me correctly, in the health and social services RPA legislation. Therefore, there is nothing unusual about it.

**Mr Lunn:** Could the ESA step outside that rule to do something that could be construed as not being conducive to its normal activities?

**Mr C Stewart:** Specific departmental approval will be required for some of the things that the ESA will be entitled to do. In addition, more generally, if the Department felt that it was doing something that was not sufficiently related to its statutory functions in legislation or to the priorities that the Department has determined for it, we would step in very quickly with a formal direction if necessary.

**Mr McCausland:** The folk from the Governing Bodies Association suggested that the ESA would be very bureaucratic and, therefore, a substantial portion of the budget would be spent internally in the ESA rather than going to schools. How do you see that working out? Will moving from the boards to the ESA reduce or increase bureaucracy and, therefore, the amount of money kept at the centre?

**Mr McGrath:** A key objective of the ESA is to rationalise many of the administrative functions across the five boards and organisations and to bear out savings. The Department will consider the targets that it will set for management costs and bureaucracy, and the Minister has a clear view that she wants to get as much money out of the education budget to the front line of schools. That is a general objective above and beyond issues around voluntary grammars and in schools in general.

**Mr McCausland:** What will the target be?

**Mr McGrath:** We have not decided on the target yet.

**Mr McCausland:** As much as 90% could go to schools.

**Mr McGrath:** The Committee has had various discussions on the issue, and it would be helpful to get clarity about what we are counting. The amount of money in the Minister's budget that goes into schools now — whether it is earmarked or is part of the agreed school budget — will increase over time; however, the scope to do that is limited by the expectations with regard to efficiency savings in future budgets and by cost pressures. Nevertheless, it is a general objective. We want to reduce educational bureaucracy to the minimum necessary to deliver an effective service and to get as much money as possible into classrooms.

**Mr McCausland:** When will you have that figure?

**Mr McGrath:** It will not be a set figure, but rather a figure over time or for each year.

**Mr McCausland:** What will the initial figure be?

**Mr McGrath:** I have said to the Committee before that the Department will want to consider setting an envelope for senior management costs in the ESA. That will address concerns that the Chairperson expressed about its structure at the beginning and about whether it could expand willy-nilly. Therefore, we will want to put an envelope on it. We would like to get more information and agreement on the precise percentage of money that goes into classrooms, because different figures have been quoted from LEAs across the water. The Minister may want to set an objective for the ESA over a three- or five-year period and change the percentage over time.

**Mr McCausland:** That may not happen. However, the ESA will be established on 1 January 2010, which means that the target must be set before that date. At what point during this year will that happen?

**Mr McGrath:** It will be a target as part of the general oversight of the ESA to be delivered as it comes into full being. The ESA will not reduce or increase the amount of money into classrooms in three months at the end of the next financial year. However, it could be a target for 2010-11 to 2011-12.

**Mr McCausland:** On 1 January 2010, will there not be a reduction in the amount of administration?

**Mr McGrath:** There will not be an automatic reduction on 1 January 2010.

**Mr McCausland:** When the ESA comes into being and the boards cease to exist, they will no longer employ people; therefore the reduction will have happened at that point.

**Mr McGrath:** The people who are employed by the boards on 31 December 2009 will be employed by the ESA on 1 January 2010. Therefore, the rationalisation process will take a bit of time.

**Mr McCausland:** How long will it take?

**Mr McGrath:** That will depend on each sector. Gavin Boyd has appeared before the Committee to talk about the work that was done in the various sectors. The departmental overseers will have to say how long the process will take. However, we should not underestimate the management challenge of welding together seven or more organisations.

**Mr McCausland:** Before we are asked to sign off on a Bill we need a clear steer from you on its benefits in real terms, and a target figure would give us some indication. The argument is being made to us that slimming down administration will put more money into schools, which is great. However, you must have an estimate; you cannot be working totally in the dark. When can we get an estimate? I do not want to overstep the mark, but it is incumbent on the Department to produce an estimate of the increase in money that will go to schools.

**Mr McGrath:** I must be careful about what I say: I do not want to feed out figures about savings, because they will then be expected when the ESA is established. We operate in a wider budgetary context; we have 3% efficiency savings to realise at present, and all the indications are that that figure will increase. Therefore any savings made might have to be used to deliver on efficiency savings targets. If we have to make 3.5% efficiency savings in future, the last place that we want to make them is in the classroom. We may set a figure for the percentage of the overall money that goes into the classroom, but that does not necessarily mean that many of the savings will flow if we have efficiency savings —

**Mr McCausland:** Yes, but you would be taking out only 3%. I assume that you are trying to make a much bigger saving than 3% by rationalising the system.

**Mr McGrath:** Yes, but the 3% figure is for the entire education budget. If you were to turn that into a savings figure on the smaller amount of an administration budget, it could be 10%, 15% or 20%.

**Mr McCausland:** Therefore, there may not be any money coming out of schools.

**Mr McGrath:** There may or may not. As a percentage of the money that has been spent, the Minister has an objective to increase extra money, but she does not know what efficiency target will be set. Therefore, it would be either premature or brave to give a figure for the amount of savings that will automatically be made in the front line when we do not know the efficiency cull.

**Mr McCausland:** We know how much is being spent on the boards of administration. By this stage, Gavin Boyd must have some picture in his mind about the structure and the related costs and salaries. What is the difference? What will the saving be? What money will go to meet the 3% cuts or be put into the hands of schools? When will we have those sums? When will Gavin Boyd know the cost of his new regime?

**Mr McGrath:** I do not know exactly when he will have answers to those questions. As he said the last time that he gave evidence to the Committee, work is being done on what models will be in certain areas. You are correct that once that has been done, he will be able to work out what the broader picture will look like and how much money will be saved by certain stages. I do not know how long that will take. We can try to find out.

**Mr McCausland:** We are now in early March, and the Bill's Committee Stage will run until some time in September. Can you assure us that we will have a figure before the end of the Committee Stage? Otherwise we are being asked to buy a pig in a poke.

**Mr McGrath:** We will do our best to get the information for which you ask.

**The Chairperson:** How will that relate to the business case, about which serious issues were raised? Has there been a revision of the business case for the reasons that Nelson McCausland gave? Not revising it creates the impression that everything is vague and hopeful, which is no way to enact legislation. We expect schools and the other parties involved to sign up and be accountable and show where money will be spent, yet we are allowing the ESA to come into existence on a very flimsy and ad hoc basis. We are being asked to agree to look at the ESA in three years' time and amend it if necessary, but that is not the reason why we are bringing it into existence.

**Mr McGrath:** I disagree with that perception. There is a business case on the establishment of the ESA.

**The Chairperson:** It is only an outline business case.

**Mr McGrath:** Outline is a technical term used by DFP; outline business cases are detailed, rigorous documents. One then moves to a final business case, which is why the previous one is called an outline business case. However, outline business cases still

have to be made to green-book standards and with Treasury guidance.

The Department's outline business case demonstrates that establishing the ESA will save up to £20 million in the first three years; that will create a vehicle in the ESA to rationalise education administration and draw out further savings. The Department is wary of getting the long-term figure up front because it could be offering hostages to fortune. However, the outline business case is one of the more robust pieces of evidence for RPA changes. If it were regarded as flimsy, some of the other institutional changes are flimsy as well.

**The Chairperson:** When will we move from outline to final business case before the ESA is brought into existence?

**Mr McGrath:** Work is in hand to move from the outline business case to the full business case, as required.

**The Chairperson:** Could the Committee get an update on that?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes. However, I have had this conversation with you already and with the previous Chairperson. The Department would be hesitant about writing down sure-fire savings over time in a business case. We know that we will have to deliver efficiency savings, and we believe that the ESA is the vehicle to tackle rationalising administration and, as far as possible, make saving that will not affect classrooms. That is the Department's firm belief.

**The Chairperson:** No doubt, Mr McGrath, the Committee will return to that issue.

**Mr Elliott:** I have several issues, but I know that we are pushed for time so I will limit them.

**The Chairperson:** I assure you that we will come back to them.

**Mr Elliott:** The last issue worries me, and Mr McGrath's answer that the Department is reluctant to put something down on paper worries me even more.

**Mr McGrath:** The Department made it clear that the key objective of the ESA — along with raising standards — is to enable savings to be brought out from the current education administration, to sweep them up and, ideally, to get them into the front line. That is the objective. However, at the minute that is difficult, and I would be nervous about offering up a figure that could be taken as Gospel and almost as a contribution towards savings before we even have a further 3% target. Those figures could be taken as opportunistic savings, and we would still have to make 3% savings targets above and beyond that, which would be punitive.

**Mr Elliott:** With your indulgence, Chairperson, I think that we will return to that at some stage.

Chris Stewart used the example that the GBA used earlier about defending a case at tribunal, saying that the ESA and the board of governors would be there. Who would take the lead; who would be the defence at the tribunal?

**Mr C Stewart:** It would depend on the nature of the complaint and the matter that was being complained about. If, for example, it were a dismissal and the ESA had acted on an instruction from a board of governors to dismiss a member of staff — I am not a lawyer, let alone a tribunal chairperson — I would have thought that the lead party would be the board of governors, since it was the body that had taken the action that had led to the dismissal.

**Mr Elliott:** Therefore the ESA would be the secondary party as the main employer?

**Mr C Stewart:** I do not know that I would place a great deal of emphasis on who is named first or second.

**Mr Elliott:** It would be a huge issue, especially for a board of governors.

**Mr C Stewart:** Not necessarily; the tribunal or court would decide where the balance of responsibility or blame lay and would apply its judgement on remedies or damages accordingly.

**Mr Elliott:** That is why the Committee wants those who will be responsible to be made clear in the Bill. I appreciate that there will always be legal arguments; however, that highlights the difficulties. I use that as an example, as it shows the ambiguity in the system.

I have another issue that I want to tease out, but I will have time at some other stage.

**The Chairperson:** Who pays for the process, and will they all be represented separately? There are many matters to be satisfactorily resolved.

**Mr C Stewart:** There is a short and a long answer to that question. The short answer is that if something goes wrong with employment in the public education service, although the taxpayer would meet the monetary costs, education and children would also have a price to pay because money that should have been spent in classrooms would have been wasted on other matters. Whichever body the court or tribunal fines initially is a matter for the court or tribunal; however, in a publicly funded service, ultimately, the taxpayer pays.

**Mr O'Dowd:** With respect to Nelson McCausland's question about the budget, is it not the case that the Department must accumulate some £20 million of savings by the third year of the comprehensive spending review?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes. Under the CSR, we must realise savings of 3% per annum compounded. With that in mind, we indicated that establishing the ESA under the original timetable would, by the third year, contribute £21 million of savings. There are some concerns about

the timetable being delayed, but the savings are already in the bag and, of course, accounted for. We are, however, wary about predicated decisions on possible savings down the line, which may already have been accounted for in the next budgetary process. That is a real concern for us, because we might have to find yet another 3% of savings.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. We will ensure that you receive copies of today's submissions from the GBA and the bursars' association; in addition, we will ensure that the GBA receives a copy of your response to the issues raised. This is not the end of the matter. I thank you again for your attendance, and, no doubt, we will see you again next week.

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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

18 March 2009

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### 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 Trevor Lunn  
Mr Nelson McCausland  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr John O'Dowd  
Mrs Michelle O'Neill  
Mr Edwin Poots

#### Witnesses:

Cardinal Seán Brady	} Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education
Mr John Gordon	
Bishop Donal McKeown	
Bishop Patrick Walsh	
Sister Eithne Woulfe	
Mr Donal Flanagan	} Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Mr John Gordon	
Ms La'Verne Montgomery	
Bishop John McAreavey	

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** Cardinal Brady and delegation, you are very welcome to the Education Committee meeting this morning. Thank you also for making your submission to us in writing; members have had it for a few days. The acoustics in the Chamber are not great, so please bear that in mind. It would help us all to hear your submission clearly so that there will be no confusion. Please make your presentation, Cardinal, and then members will ask questions on it.

**His Eminence Cardinal Seán Brady, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland (Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education):** Thank you, Mr Chairman. On behalf of the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE), I would like to thank the members of the Education Committee

for their kind invitation to discuss our submission on the draft Education Bill. We are very happy to do so.

The Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education speaks for the trustees of the entire family of Catholic schools; that network consists of some 550 nursery, primary and post-primary maintained and voluntary schools in Northern Ireland.

I am joined this morning by some of the members of our commission: Bishop Patrick Walsh, a former Bishop of Down and Connor; Sister Eithne Woulfe, Sister of the Order of St Louis, a religious order that has schools across Ireland, including Kilkeel and Ballymena; and Bishop Donal McKeown, chairman of the commission. We are joined by Mr John Gordon, legal adviser to the commission. We are happy to answer any questions that you might have regarding our written submission.

Before addressing that submission, however, I am conscious that we meet in the aftermath of the brutal murders of Constable Stephen Carroll and Sappers Cenzig Azimkar and Mark Quinsey. I consider those crimes an attack on the whole community. They were an attack on the democratic will of people across this island and on their overwhelming support for the institution in which we are gathered this morning. I am therefore mindful that we are engaging with you today as democratically elected Members of the legislative Assembly. We are engaging in the privileged context of a democracy — a privilege that we can never take for granted. We do so with great respect for you and for your role as politicians.

I am mindful too of our shared duty as elected and as civic leaders to do all that we can to consolidate the progress already made towards a more secure, confident and reconciled future for everyone in our society, not least for the young people.

As trustees of Catholic schools, we are fully committed to playing our part in building a more peaceful future for all in our society. As stated in our publication 'Building Peace, Shaping the Future', our society in Northern Ireland has been characterised by profound conflict, and those charged with the education of our young people have an important role to play in breaking down barriers of ignorance, misunderstanding and suspicion. Our schools cannot carry the full responsibility for reconciliation on their own, but we recognise that they have an important part to play.

The publication went on to state that tolerance and respect for difference are at the heart of all Christian and human education. That brings me directly to our submission on the draft Education Bill — respect for diversity is one of the key values underpinning that submission. We see respect for diversity as part of the contribution that Catholic schools make to our society. We also see that respect for diversity as part of the

obligation of society to Catholic and, indeed, other schools.

In Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and many other parts of the world, the provision of publicly funded, faith-based schools — or other schools founded on a particular philosophical, cultural or linguistic ethos — is accepted as a normal part of society. I hold that the provision of a diverse range of schools is the mark of a mature, tolerant and reconciled society. Since that is the type of society to which we in Northern Ireland aspire, it follows that we should provide for a variety of schools, based on available resources, from which parents may choose.

The principle of diverse provision is also recognised and protected in international instruments on human rights. Notably, protocol 1, article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights upholds the right of parents to have their children educated in a manner consistent with their religious or philosophical convictions. As trustees of Catholic schools, we have a duty to strive to ensure that that right of parents is adequately respected and provided for in the Education Bill.

As the Bill stands, we remain unclear as to how certain key aspects of the proposed legislation will operate. We therefore have significant reservations about our ability to support key aspects of the Bill in its current form. Perhaps the Committee will address our concerns.

Before outlining some of those concerns, I want to make it clear that any right that we seek to have respected or any provision or resource that we seek for Catholic schools, we seek for each and every provider of education in Northern Ireland. Therefore we support those elected representatives and others who uphold the principle of equality in education policy and provision in Northern Ireland.

In doing so, we are conscious that some people may have the impression that the Catholic sector is somehow advantaged over other sectors in Northern Ireland; that is historically incorrect. Indeed, until relatively recently, the Catholic sector received less support from the state than any other sector. However, it is true that when other sectors transferred ownership of their schools to the state, the Catholic community maintained its ownership; that took place at considerable financial cost to the Catholic community, particularly to our Catholic parishes. However, it was a cost that generations of Catholics were willing to bear in order to guarantee the ethos of their schools and the right of parents to have such schools. Responsibility for ensuring the continuation of that right falls to us as the trustees of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, and it is a right that we will strive to uphold in all circumstances.

However, as trustees, it is becoming increasingly clear to us that one consequence of the decision of the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) to hand their schools over to the state is that many parents from other Christian traditions, as well as those from other cultural, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, believe that their right to have schools with a particular ethos is not adequately provided for. On behalf of the Catholic trustees, I want to make it clear that we will lend our wholehearted support to any legislative or policy change that facilitates the right of parents from other religious, cultural, linguistic or ethnic backgrounds to be more adequately addressed.

To ensure adequate provision for parents who choose a Catholic education for their children, we have highlighted in our submission several key issues that need to be further clarified or addressed in the Education Bill. There are three critical issues on which we are happy to elaborate in our response to Committee members' questions. First, there is a need to clarify the role of the education and skills authority (ESA) as the employer and/or the employing authority. The proposal in clause 3 for the ESA to be the employer of all staff in all schools is unacceptable; it is a fundamental impediment to the ability of owners/trustees to exercise their right and duty to promote and guard the ethos and defining character of a school. To exercise our duties as trustees adequately, we require that the board of governors of each school be the legal employer of all staff in their schools. As it stands, the provision in the Bill appears to run counter to the principle, which we support, of giving maximised autonomy to schools. Therefore we suggest that further clarification is needed on clause 8.

We accept that the functions of each sectoral support body will be as agreed between the Department of Education and the owners/trustees as stated in policy paper 21. The functions of a sectoral body will be complementary and will not duplicate or overlap with the functions of the ESA. That should be reflected in the proposed legislation. The business plan submitted by the Catholic trustees addresses any fears that members of the Committee may have about the proposed scale of such a body for the Catholic sector — or indeed for any other sector; we are not trying to create a new Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). However, we need adequate support to enable the discharge of functions that properly belong to owners/trustees. That would also avoid the necessity of the ESA having, in effect, to negotiate key decisions with every individual school in a given sector. Those support bodies make sense in terms of value for money and good administration.

They have already been shown to play a key role in raising standards. Policy and/or legislation provision must be made for their role in supporting schools in

the appointment of teachers, particularly at leadership level; their role on behalf of school owners in the planning and provision of schools; their advocacy role on behalf of a given sector; and their role in supporting and developing ethos.

Similarly, there is no point in having such support bodies if schools in a sector can ignore them. Therefore, it is critical that legislation place a duty on boards of governors to co-operate with the support body in their respective sector. Strong and committed boards of governors are required to maximise autonomy and to ensure the ethos of a school. Clarification is required on the appointment of community governors. It is essential that legislation reflect the importance of making such appointments in consultation with owners and trustees.

That is a short overview of the main issues that we want to bring to the Committee's attention. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to explain those issues directly. We are happy to take questions — at least my colleagues are. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:** You have delegated autonomy on the commission's behalf, Cardinal. First of all, Cardinal, the Committee endorses your opening comments on the recent murders. One of the soldiers who was murdered in Antrim will be buried today, and our thoughts and prayers continue to be with those who have suffered as a result of those heinous crimes. We welcome everyone in our society's condemnation of those events.

We appreciate the candid way in which you have raised issues. In the past weeks, the Committee has listened to the concerns of several organisations, and we will continue to take oral evidence from relevant organisations to establish plainly how the Bill can be amended to become more acceptable. Your remarks underscored an issue that has been prevalent in our deliberations — the lack of clarity. A more than considerable mist still hangs over the detail — or lack of detail — on the ESA, particularly on the issue of employment and the employer.

Last week, the Committee heard the Governing Bodies Association (GBA) raise its concerns, which the Department dismissed in a subsequent rebuttal. As the process continues, there seems to be — as with most issues in Northern Ireland — two camps. The various education providers are of the opinion that there is no clarity on the employer issue. However, the other body of opinion — primarily the Department — believes that there has been a misunderstanding and maintains that there is clarity in the Bill and that it contains no threat to the various bodies that raised concerns.

Members should indicate their desire to ask questions, because I do not want to ask all the questions; I am

sure that the Committee will agree that I have never done that. Cardinal, will you and your team clarify the current representation of trustees on boards of governors?

What influence and consultation rights do trustees have in the appointment of other members of a board? Is the representation and influence not sufficient to enable trustees to trust boards of governors to safeguard the ethos of Catholic schools in formulating schemes of management and employment? Is that not enough to ensure that the ethos is developed and maintained by a body that is significantly accountable to trustees?

**Dr Brady:** I invite Bishop Walsh to take that question, because he has much more experience of serving on boards of governors in this part of the world than I have.

**Most Reverend Patrick Walsh, Bishop Emeritus of Down and Connor (Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education):** That is a very important question. We talk about the ethos of a school, and we all know that each school has its own character. However, it is essential to us that the entire Catholic sector has an overarching ethos, and that is what we seek to maintain. It is the responsibility and duty of bishops, religious and trustees to determine the overarching ethos of each school, and each school also has its own particular character within that ethos.

We expect every member of the board of governors of one of our schools to subscribe to the ethos of that school; there is no point in appointing someone to the governing body of a school who is not in agreement with the general ethos of that school. The CCMS, of which I was a member for many years, had several members who were not of the Catholic faith. However, those people were totally in tune with the ethos for which the CCMS stands, and they made a valuable contribution. Irrespective of their tradition, no one who does not accept the ethos of one of our schools should be a member of the board of governors of that school.

Under the current composition, trustees have the right to appoint directly four members of a board of governors; there is also an elected teacher, an elected parent and so on. Until now, the Department of Education has appointed its two members in consultation with the trustees, and the education and library boards have done likewise in the maintained sector. Those appointments have always been made in consultation with trustees, and we want the new legislation to ensure that that continues. I understand that the relevant schedules of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and of the previous Order still apply and that there will be meaningful consultation with the trustees with regard to appointments.

We have no problem with the ESA having the right to make appointments — whether two, if that is the number decided — to the board of governors

of our schools, provided that those appointments are made in meaningful consultation with the trustees. It is for that reason that we have asked for the phrase “in consultation with” to be used in the legislation rather than simply “consulting”. That should ensure meaningful consultation rather than allow people merely to say, “We have consulted; end of story.” We want serious and meaningful consultation and, therefore, assurance that those who are appointed to the board of governors of a school subscribe to the ethos of that school.

**Most Reverend Donal McKeown, Auxiliary Bishop of Down and Connor (Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education):** We all want a more effective and efficient running of our education system. The Government have the legislature, the Executive and the judiciary; similarly, there is a range of bodies in the education system between which a balance must be maintained. Those bodies include the Department of Education, the ESA, the trustees and owners of schools and boards of governors; they all have vital and complementary roles to play in the running of schools. We have a sense of a sectoral identity, but governors are committed to running their schools.

It is a question of striking a balance between harnessing the passion of individual governors and their commitment to their schools — which has raised standards across the educational community in Northern Ireland — and the broader educational communities. There are balances to be struck; we do not seek out-and-out control.

Under present legislation, boards of governors have a huge amount of power and trustees have a negligible amount of right. We are trying to determine how to ensure that all education stakeholders — which is now, according to a radio programme this morning, a very unpopular term — can assert their rights without disturbing the equilibrium at the heart of the education system. We do not seek a Stalinist, centralist control: we want to maximise how devolved responsibility can be exercised in the interests of pupils while maintaining a cohesive system and cohesive sectors.

**The Chairperson:** The commission’s submission stresses the role of the employer as the person or body with the power; even more so than the issue of ownership. I noticed that your submission draws a distinction between the employer and the power of the trustees.

Under the current arrangement, the CCMS employs teachers and the Department employs non-teaching staff. If we take what the commission proposes to its logical conclusion, the commission would like the power that is the domain of the CCMS with regard to teachers given to individual boards of governors. That would lead to boards of governors being the employers of all non-teaching staff.

Is that not a step back from a more streamlined and efficient way of governing our schools? We will discuss clause 8 in a minute or two, but I want to tease that point out first. The submission rightly refers to attempts to achieve more streamlining. If we started with a clean sheet, we would not be starting from here, but to use a well-worn phrase — which the media may no longer find acceptable — we are where we are. The sectors, the institutions and the bodies govern and are responsible for education. However, do you not see that there could be a conflict between trying to achieve a more streamlined way of governing our schools and what is sought in your submission?

**Dr McKeown:** At present, there is a wide variety of relationships between schools and their employees. The voluntary grammar sector employed everybody — it chose when to employ, when not to employ, when to promote and so on; whereas the CCMS used a comparatively light touch as an employing body. That ensured that a school followed correct procedures in the appointment of staff, but the boards of governors made the decisions. With the education and library board situation, people had to go through a board of governors and then pass on a number of names. We want to find the most effective method.

We are keen that as much responsibility as possible should be devolved locally to avoid having multiple tiers of filters through which matters must proceed. We seek effectiveness and efficiency, and it is possible to balance those. The last thing that we want to do is add more layers in attempting to remove the multiplicity of layers that we have at present.

The voluntary grammar sector has demonstrated its ability to manage its resources effectively and accountably.

If that model works for some schools, then as much authority as possible should be devolved to them. That should be done in the interests of good education, the raising of standards, and it should be done in such a way that the schools are accountable.

**The Chairperson:** Some people might dispute that the CCMS could be described as having a light touch. I have never heard it described as such before.

**Dr McKeown:** I was referring to appointments.

**The Chairperson:** I appreciate that. I am sure that the CCMS will be able to rebut that comment when it appears before the Committee later. Bishop Walsh, do you want to comment?

**Dr Walsh:** Bishop McKeown has summed up the position. The voluntary grammar sector, in which the schools are generally large and have plenty of resources, has shown that it has experience in that area; there are strong boards of governors and they have been well able to make successful appointments. Schools in the

maintained sector have seen the value of the CCMS having a “light touch” in assisting them to make appointments.

Some small schools would not be in a position to make appointments without some assistance, and perhaps the support bodies could provide that. However, in general, schools should be given as much autonomy as possible.

**The Chairperson:** I wish to speak personally, rather than on behalf of the Committee, about one of my concerns. I would like locally delegated autonomy, which has been the domain of the voluntary grammar schools, to become the domain of all schools. That autonomy has been the envy of the non-grammar schools, and Donal referred to the multiple layers involved in making teacher appointments and choosing one candidate from three. Such autonomy would, therefore, be good for our education system.

Clauses 3 and 8 are causing major concerns. Clause 8 states that the ESA may not lawfully refuse to put into effect any proper decision of a board of governors on employment matters. If model employment schemes and associated guidance were to clarify that and any other points for which you consider clarification to be necessary — and if those schemes were subject to full consultation with submitting authorities and, possibly, an independent appeals system or to regulation and control by the Assembly — would that remove some of the commission’s key concerns?

That issue was touched on at last week’s meeting, and the Committee asked the Department to provide “mechanisms” for how it could be done. If such mechanisms, structures, and regulation were added, would that help to address your concerns?

**Mr John Gordon (Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education):** A pragmatic solution is required. A dispute mechanism would deal with the disputes that arise between boards of governors and the ESA. Disputes within particular schools are likely to be internal; they may relate to selection and recruitment or to disciplinary issues. This is about providing boards of governors with the right to deal with disputes as they deem fit.

Clause 8(2) does not specify who will determine what is lawful. If the ESA approves a scheme of employment and management for a particular school, it should adopt a hands-off approach thereafter, and the school should have the right to choose its own representation at any tribunal or court hearing. The ESA should indemnify the school, as suggested in clause 8(2), although clarification is required about any costs or damages that may be incurred in facilitating a school’s challenge and in dealing with a dispute.

It would be only if it were not possible to deal with a situation that there would be a conflict with

the ESA. The ESA should not be directing schools in the minutiae of employment and disciplinary matters. The position on the ground at the moment is very similar. Schools have the power in the maintained sector — and, indeed, the voluntary grammar sector — to conduct and represent themselves at tribunals and courts. That position should continue.

**The Chairperson:** To clarify the issue: are you saying that provision for appeals and other mechanisms would only resolve disputes between boards of governors and the ESA and would not address the fundamental problem?

**Mr Gordon:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** So, there is a need to go further than appeals and mechanisms?

**Mr Gordon:** I am not sure whether there is a need to go further. There should be clarification, either in primary or secondary legislation, that boards of governors would have the power. In fact, it is hinted in various papers from the Department and in some of the evidence that was given last week that there would be a clear autonomous employer role for boards of governors. The words “advocacy” and “representation” were used. If that were the case, boards of governors would, obviously, have the right to employ their own lawyers to represent them. Those lawyers, in turn, would represent not only the school but the ethos of the school in the manner in which a case is taken forward to a tribunal or court.

**The Chairperson:** We always return to the same issue — the need for clarity. In an appeal situation, who would be the appellant and who would represent education? Last week, an eminent legal expert appeared before the Committee on behalf of the Governing Bodies Association; today, Mr Gordon is here. The Department is stating that the ESA may not lawfully refuse to put into effect any proper decision of a board of governors on employment matters. There is now, clearly, a conflict of legal opinion. At some stage, the Committee will have to determine which of the two legal positions it will accept, given all that it has heard. We will obviously have to return to this issue.

I do not want today’s session to be curtailed — if we run over time, so be it, provided that that time is valuable and well spent. I want the commission, the CCMS, and all organisations who submit oral evidence to have the confidence that the Committee will listen genuinely to the arguments. That is our statutory responsibility and duty, and we will carry it out fully.

**Mr O’Dowd:** Your Eminence, Bishop Walsh and Bishop McKeown, you are very welcome. I have read your speech of last Thursday with great interest, and we have a responsibility to study that speech and consider the concerns that you raise in it, which are clearly deeply felt. Today, you have again outlined many of those concerns; and, hopefully, from this and

other engagements, we will be able to clarify the issues and use our best offices to reassure where we can and build a common approach to the future provision of education.

The role that the commission and the CCMS have played in education is invaluable. You have provided an excellent education service through very difficult times in our collective history, and you are, justly, proud of that. We do not want to do anything to damage that provision or the relationship of that provision.

Many of the points that I wish to raise have been raised by the Chairperson, particularly in relation to the role of boards of governors. I think that this is an area in which clarity has to be given, either through further discussions or through some other mechanism. I do not read the situation in the same way as you are reading it — that the roles of boards of governors are being diminished, either in providing ethos or as the employment authority. Will you map out the differences between what is in place and what you see happening? John Gordon already touched on the legal provision and tribunals, but where do your concerns lie about the day-to-day running of schools and employment management?

**Mr Gordon:** Obviously, there is a difference between the Catholic-maintained and voluntary grammar sectors. In the latter, boards of governors are the employers and have the right to hire, fire and to discipline teachers and pupils alike. Frequently, one finds that voluntary grammar schools have taken out insurance to protect themselves against the costs they might incur were they to end up in court or at an employment tribunal. Therefore, there is complete autonomy in that sector.

On a day-to-day basis in the Catholic-maintained sector, as Bishop McKeown has said, the CCMS has responsibility in statute for the scheme of management, which includes employment, selection and recruitment, and for assisting boards of governors to deal with schools. Schools have the day-to-day decision-making power on issues such as selection, recruitment, hiring, firing and discipline. The CCMS support system makes a valuable contribution to our schools, particularly — as Bishop Walsh indicated — the smaller ones.

The situation is different again in the controlled sector, where schools are subject to the education and library boards. Those boards have their own joint legal services, which provide representation for controlled schools at tribunals and in courts on a range of issues, particularly those relating to the schools estate. I assume that those joint legal services will cross over to the ESA, which will then also have its own in-house legal team.

**Mr O'Dowd:** As the Chairperson said, we have had three different legal interpretations. That is the nature of legal matters, which is why there are so many solicitors and barristers — we are fortunate to have so many of them. Therefore, the Committee has to do its homework to examine those opinions. However, the ESA is not bringing forward any new employment legislation; it will only interpret and adapt what currently exists. Is that a fair statement?

**Mr Gordon:** That leads to the crucial statement: who determines what is lawful?

**Mr O'Dowd:** It would be a tribunal or a judge.

**Mr Gordon:** If one is providing an autonomous role for boards of governors, then it they who should determine what is lawful, not the ESA.

**Mr O'Dowd:** In your earlier comments to the Chairperson, you said that the ESA should legally indemnify boards of governors. In such circumstances, a board of governors, as an autonomous unit, would be saying that its interpretation of the law is correct and that it is prepared for its decisions to be challenged in court. Is that what you are saying?

**Mr Gordon:** Yes; essentially, boards of governors should be given the power to make decisions. That is what happens on a day-to-day basis at the moment. Provided that a board of governors acts responsibly, within the law, and not recklessly, it is indemnified by the relevant education and library board for any decisions that it takes. The safeguard in that is what is referred to in clause 8(2); that boards of governors have a scheme of management and employment that they are asked to adhere to on issues such as selection and recruitment and that that scheme of management and employment respects and enforces current equality legislation.

Nothing is black and white when it comes to selection and recruitment, because the basis and nature of applications can be contested. The board of governors that made the decision in the first instance must determine whether allegations made by an applicant or complainant are valid. It should, subsequently, be afforded an opportunity to defend its decision-making power rather than having the ESA simply overriding it. At present, education and library boards do not deal with matters in that way, and the process should remain as it is.

**Mr O'Dowd:** However, a defence could be based only on the current law; is that right?

**Mr Gordon:** That is correct.

**The Chairperson:** Apart from the veto, or exemption, on recruitment, is the commission seeking any other exemptions?

**Mr Gordon:** No. The schools will adhere to the current equality legislation.

**Mr D Bradley:** Good morning, Your Eminence and team.

Autonomy is one of the crucial concepts in this matter, and your paper outlines your support for maximum autonomy. The Department has a different concept, which it calls maximum supported autonomy. Your proposal that employment powers be vested in boards of governors is quite radical, because the view expressed to date is that many of them do not have the capacity to carry that responsibility. Therefore, until now, sectoral support from the CCMS has been required to support and advise boards of governors on employment issues, which are, as we all know, a potential minefield.

To date, the concept of maximum supported autonomy has operated in the maintained sector. However, you talked today about placing that burden of responsibility on schools, and Bishop Walsh mentioned that some of the smaller schools would not be able to deal with employment matters without further support. Are you moving towards the Department's position on supported autonomy?

That leads to the question: from where would that support, if required, come? The evidence that the Committee has received so far is that the ESA would encourage schools to be as autonomous as possible while supporting them when needed. Bishop Walsh suggested that the new emerging sectoral body, or bodies, should provide that support. Paragraph 7 of your paper states that you envisage a need for:

"Adequate structures of support, co-ordination and solidity for each education sector in Northern Ireland."

How far should that support extend, and to what extent should it be provided for in statute?

**Dr McKeown:** I will consider the question in the broad sense, and perhaps John will talk about any legal technicalities. We all recognise that having a multiplicity of education bodies was not the most efficient and effective way of administering education. To ensure that best practice can continue, we must take into account the current situation in which some schools have experienced a huge amount of autonomy and in which others accept that they need a great deal of support.

We are not hung up on individual phrases as long as the outcomes benefit young people, serve the common good and work in the interests of reconciliation. From the information in the consultation paper and the advice that the Committee received from the Department in early January 2009, it is quite clear that the role of the sectoral body would be, primarily, to provide advisory, representational and advocacy services, but not front line services. We are not looking for a body to provide those front line services.

If a school can get all the advice that it needs about correct procedures from the ESA, then that is fine; as long as the school is in a position to make its own decisions as much as possible. The CCMS structure seemed to have provided for that by outlining what schools should do and supporting that work, while resting all decisions in the hands of schools.

It seems that we want to take the range of sectors and maximise the best that is currently available in the interests of all. It is important to note that in the review of public administration the most publicly administered schools were not necessarily the most successful. That was not necessarily the most successful way to get the best outcomes. Therefore, the question is how can we build on what is already good in our system?

**Mr Gordon:** The commission wishes to see the provision of sectoral support — not just to the Catholic sector but to all sectors — reflected in the legislation. It is quite extraordinary that the Catholic sector — the largest sector and provider of education to children in Northern Ireland — is not supported and maintained in the legislation. Yet, I note that the Bill does not seek to repeal article 64 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. Paragraph 1 of article 64 states:

"It will be the duty of the Department to encourage and facilitate to development of integrated education".

That article remains. In addition, Irish-medium education, by virtue of article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, is also being retained. Therefore, two smaller sectors within education are, in fact, getting statutory encouragement and support yet the largest educational sector is not receiving such support in the Education Bill.

**The Chairperson:** Following on from that point, the Department, in its perceived wisdom, says that it is introducing the Education Bill to get a more streamlined and equitable system of governance. I determine from your comments that we will not have such a system because two sectors have a position of prominence over and above the other sectors because of article 64 of the 1989 Order and article 89 of the 1998 Order.

**Mr Gordon:** The Department has a statutory obligation to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education and integrated education. The Department has recognised that sectoral support is required not just for those sectors and the Catholic sector, but for the controlled sector too. The Cardinal has alluded to the fact that the commission believes that that support should be extended to all sectors and representatives of the various sectors within education and should be reflected in the legislation.

**Sister Eithne Woulfe (Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education):** I will make a couple of important points about statutory obligations. There is a level of mutual accountability once something is part

of a statutory instrument. In this case, education is a common good. Therefore, support services for whatever sectors must provide value for the common good. There should be a mechanism in place to ensure accountability and transparency, and ensure that they are not simply part of a private enterprise. We are talking about public moneys and about something that provides a service to the people.

One of the things that the CCMS has proven, as has research in other jurisdictions, is that ethos adds value. Every group of schools has an ethos, and it is important that, somehow or other, in the context of diversity, each distinctive ethos is promoted — not as segregation, but as some sort of healthy mutuality. It is therefore important that there should be some process of inspection to determine how those support services add value to the education experience of young people, because, ultimately, that is the bottom line.

**Mrs M Bradley:** Good morning, Your Eminence, and everyone. In your submission you state that the sectoral support bodies should have a role in raising standards, and that that is the Department's rationale for establishing the ESA. Is there a danger that, with the ESA and a number of other bodies involved in raising standards, we may have a case of "too many cooks", and standards may suffer as a result?

**Dr McKeown:** You are quite right in putting your finger on the need to raise standards. Too many young people are being failed by the current system, despite the wonderful efforts of so many schools and teachers. There is a balance to be struck between ensuring that we have a streamlined system and maximising the ability of schools locally — to bring in local governors, to work with people to develop links with local enterprises and businesses, and all of that sort of thing, in the interests of quality outcomes.

Outcomes are not simply the result of inputs — they arise from an atmosphere, a sense that, yes, we can do it, and a sense of belonging and identity. I often quote one of our local parish priests in Belfast who says that in his parish, male life expectancy is now 50. There is a shocking level of people being failed by the system, and just having good teachers and good governors is part of the process of dealing with that.

We are looking for what will actually deliver on the ground in particular parts of Belfast or the rest of the country. If that costs appreciable amounts of money, we have to ask whether it is worth investing whatever it takes in order to bring up that tail of young people who are being failed by society. They are falling into addictions, self-harm, depression, and all of those things. We have to ensure that their needs are a priority for us, and that we put in place a system that will ensure quality outcomes, especially for those with the biggest needs.

Many of us would have done well in a hedge school. Our emphasis has to be on what is going to help those who most need support, not just what will look well on a piece of paper as a nice flow diagram. Of course, there has to be accountability and an organised system, but it is important that that is biased in favour of those who have most needs, of one sort or another.

We in the Catholic sector are certainly not looking for any form of unilateral declaration of independence — we are looking to maximise outcomes for everybody, to ensure that reconciliation is a key part of what we do, and to serve the common good. Being a very large sector is not just a privilege, it is also a huge responsibility. We have to ensure that the legislation ensures outcomes, particularly for those who have the greatest needs — there are too many of those in our society at the present time. The taxpayer will pay for the problems that arise from that into the future.

**Dr Walsh:** In response to Mrs Bradley, it is important that we all recognise the importance of sectoral support bodies, as the Department of Education has done. That is accepted, and we are very pleased about that. As the Cardinal said, in policy paper 21 the roles and functions were spelt out quite clearly, and there is no question of duplicating the roles and functions of the ESA. It is important that the roles and functions of support bodies should be enshrined and made clear in legislation. That is the kind of clarity that we need.

There is one point following from that, which Bishop McKeown has mentioned — we all have to be accountable. It is very important that if a particular support body is obliged to support schools in its sector, the schools are obliged to accept and consult with that support body.

That is also important. Our submission says that schools must have due regard to the ESA's advice as they would with the sectoral body. I hope that that clarifies our position.

**Sister Woulfe:** I want to reinforce Bishop Walsh's comments. There are, probably, three key issues. First, support bodies should be slimline and should not duplicate services that are provided by other bodies. Secondly, as the Chairperson outlined in his introductory remarks, there is a need for clarity, and sometimes the devil is in the detail. Thirdly, there must be clarity in the mediation of interests and accountability, and that important issue should be included in statute. I hope that we will not have too many cooks but will have a richer broth. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lunn:** Good morning, Your Eminence. Good morning, Bishops. The word "ethos" must be the most used word in this morning's discussions. If I thought that any of the Bill's provisions posed a genuine threat to your right to maintain a Catholic ethos in your

schools — or to the perceived ethos of voluntary grammars — I would oppose it. However, I see no such threat.

You have stressed the critical link between employment and ethos, and the employment of teachers is of primary concern to you. I am sorry to revisit old ground, but your boards of governors do not employ your teachers. However, your submission states:

“NICCE wants to make it clear, in the strongest possible terms, that it regards the right of Boards of Governors of Schools to be the legal employer ... as critical to the future provision of schools of a particular ethos and defining character”.

That has not been the case to date. An arm's-length body — the CCMS — has employed teachers, and the ESA will now do so.

I do not know whether the CCMS has a light touch or not, and neither do I know whether the ESA will have a light touch or not; but I do know what the Bill says. Under its provisions, only boards of governors can decide which staff to appoint. That is included in the departmental response; it could not be clearer.

An eminent QC who attended the Committee last week on behalf of the GBA made a similar point. However, no matter how eminent he was, he did not convince me that a problem exists. In fact, he gave one ridiculous example — I will not bore you with it — concerning Irish-medium schools. How do you explain your desire to change the existing system from the CCMS being the employer to individual schools, rather than the ESA, being the employer? Moreover, will you reiterate your problems with the appointment of community governors to schools, where the ESA must, by law, consult trustees? I do not understand your problem with that.

**Mr John Gordon (Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education):** Mr Lunn asked why we want boards of governors rather than the ESA to take decisions. The CCMS shared, fostered and developed the aspiration of Catholic ethos. As Bishop Walsh said, it had an overarching statutory role, which is outlined in the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. The Bill proposes the abolition of the CCMS, but no substitute has been proposed.

You are quite right: if boards of governors have the right to hire and fire teachers and to deal with disciplinary matters, what happens when a legal challenge is made to their decision making? Who represents the board of governors? Is the matter kicked upstairs to the ESA, which would mean that a Government secular body would represent the interests of a school with a particular ethos to foster? It is more appropriate that boards of governors have that power and that they deal with decision making and contested issues themselves.

In the current situation, the CCMS was at idem with any board of governors that it represented. To my

knowledge, there is no record of any differences of opinion or difficulties between a board of governors and the CCMS or in a board of governors following advice from the CCMS. The sectoral support body that is envisaged and which we would like to see enshrined in the legislation would perform a similar, albeit reduced, support role in those circumstances.

**Dr Brady:** Teachers are vital to the ethos of a school. I do not know whether the CCMS had a light touch or a heavy touch, but we have the impression that it had a nearer touch than the Department. That is vital.

**Mr Lunn:** The witnesses would know better than I whether it had a light touch or a heavy touch.

**Dr McKeown:** Trevor highlighted the question of community governors. Bishop Walsh made it clear that the corporate body of a board of governors should have some agreed vision for the future. It would be difficult for an integrated school to have someone on its board of governors who opposed the school's philosophy. It would be difficult for an Irish-medium bunscoil or meánscoil to have a governor who was not really all that fussed about what that school was trying to achieve.

There should be adequate public representation on boards of governors, but cohesiveness is needed on agreed broad principles about what the school wants to attain. Due note should be taken that there should be some consonance between publicly appointed governors and the ethos of the school. The last thing that we want is boards of governors to be in constant conflict over all sorts of things.

That does not mean that the trustees would have to vet appointments, but those who agree to serve on the board of governors of a controlled, voluntary, or any other school, should at least be committed to the broad vision of that school. We are trying to offer leadership, as trustees in the Catholic sector, on some very current issues. It is important that governors are committed to their school, and it is also important to recognise that the trustees have a role in the overall direction in the sector. That must be recognised; otherwise we end up with governors fighting one another instead of running the school. We want to avoid that in all circumstances.

**Mr Lunn:** Why would the ESA, in consultation with the trustees, want to appoint a governor who did not respect the ethos of a school? The question seems almost hypothetical; but why would that be a problem?

**Dr Walsh:** In so far as one can speak about one's personal experience, it has not been a problem before now. It seems that there has been proper consultation in the voluntary grammar sector and in the maintained sector; we just want to ensure that that will continue. As the Department pointed out, it is included in schedules 5 and 6 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, and it remains the case.

We would like the word “consult” to be strengthened by a phrase such as “in consultation with” so that there is genuine consultation. So far, that has taken place, but there is no guarantee that the ESA may interpret consulting in the same way. It may regard consultation as simply phoning up and providing two names.

**Mr Lunn:** The Department appeared to think that that small change in the wording would change the emphasis of the Bill, although I cannot see it myself. I do not disagree with the small change that you propose.

I am pleased that one paragraph of your submission is headed “Membership of the ESA”; I have finally found someone who agrees with me. I am slightly worried. *[Laughter.]*

**Dr Walsh:** We did not consult you, did we?

**Mr Lunn:** The proposal that the ESA have a majority of local councillors on its board fills me with dread. Your submission states:

“In NICCE our experience of the contribution of elected representatives on such bodies has generally been positive”.

I will not go into my thoughts on that, but “generally” means that sometimes it has not been positive, and the current situation of the South Eastern Education and Library Board might provide a clue about why I say that.

Although you have not been specific about what you would like to see, can I take it that you would still like to see local councillor representation on the ESA board but not as a majority — or even close to a majority? Is that a fair summation of what you think?

**Dr Walsh:** We simply ask for a better balance. It is important that the people who run the ESA will be appointed not simply because they happen to be councillors — or anything else — but because they have a specific contribution to make to educational thought. The ESA should be an educational body, and we are asking for that balance to be struck.

**Dr McKeown:** Our education system has survived difficult years — with schools often being havens of calm in the midst of a very troubled society. Educationalists have done a reasonably good job of running our education system, and there is concern that non-educational issues might, on some occasions — a minority of occasions — interfere excessively in the decision-making process.

I understand that a majority of the ESA board must be councillors — which is a reasonable, if small, pool from which to draw — because the Assembly will be responsible for passing legislation. It would be inappropriate for the body that passes legislation to be involved in the implementation thereof. We are expressing our concerns. Knowing the nature of Northern Ireland, sometimes political priorities might get in the way of what educationalists might see as other, more important, priorities.

**Mr Lunn:** I am glad that you raised it in your submission, as we have been able to put it on the record.

**The Chairperson:** I am conscious that we are running over time. However, I want to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to raise issues that concern them. Nevertheless, I ask members to be conscious of time, because we still have a considerable amount of work to get through.

Before we move on, I want to raise a point about community governors. What is the definition of community? That was not picked up in your submission. How would we define the local community? Is it the faith-based, the geographical or the social community? That needs clarity, and we need more work on the provisions for community governors in clause 35, as they are very broad and should be more defined.

**Mr Poots:** Just to clarify, the South Eastern Education and Library Board was a quango — 60% of which were not public representatives — that got itself into huge debt, and public representatives stood against cutting special needs provision. We are in this mess because of a quango of appointees, not because of public representatives.

Bishops, you set out your stall in article 7a of your submission quite clearly on a faith-based education, which you say is supported by the European Convention on Human Rights.

It appears to me that there is an inference inherent throughout your submission that the legislation is moving away from your right to provide a faith-based education and that the ESA will undermine your position.

**Dr McKeown:** We are raising concerns about the legislation’s ability to ensure that, as a sector, we can act in a cohesive manner. The Bain Report of 2006 recommended that sectoral bodies be supported, particularly for planning. The ability to bring schools together — not to knock heads together but to recognise that there are overriding priorities other than local priorities — is very important in the context of the demographic downturn. If we individualise schools excessively, all sorts of influences can become involved in deciding what a school will do, because a short-term action — for example, for the lifespan of a board of governors — seems to be the best way forward.

I go to every monthly meeting of the TRC; I am an agenda item every time, because there is a recognition of the need to ensure that faith-based education — whatever that might mean in future — continues to be accessible. As someone said, in future the problem will not be so much religious difference as religious indifference. The problem with the present system is that, in many ways, there are no secular schools for those who would like an avowedly secular education.

In 20 years' time, there will be a major reshaping of the alliances and allegiances of the education system in Northern Ireland. We are working with the transferors to ensure parents' right to have a faith-based education system in Northern Ireland that is in no way damaged by legislation, changes or streamlining. Sectoral bodies must have the right to negotiate and to work together to create new types of schools. If we centralise and individualise schools excessively, we will end up with many small empires without the cohesion of the vision and the value that ethos brings. We are looking for a balance to ensure that faith-based education will be an option for as many people as want to take advantage of it in 20 years' time.

**Mr Poots:** Would you accept the argument that the Bill gives schools the right to operate according to their own ethos and practices and brings together various streams in the overall delivery of education under the ESA? The ESA is the paymaster, and he who pays the piper calls the tune.

**Dr McKeown:** I have no problem with that. However, it is important to recognise what has enabled schools here to deliver the highest quality of education: the ability of individuals and sectors to work together. Fifty-seven per cent of pupils in Northern Ireland do not go to controlled schools; that, as the Chairperson said, is where we are starting from. We are looking for something that delivers outcomes — I keep repeating that — and which will allow those who wish to choose faith-based education in an increasingly secular society to do so. It is possible to ensure streamlining, efficiency and effectiveness within such a system. The danger is that we end up with something that looks well on a flow chart but which does not deliver.

The ability to harness local energy and enthusiasm in a group of schools is very important, as is area-based planning, which the Bain Report was strong on and in which we are at present involved. A balance can be struck. However, excessive paring may not deliver the outcomes that we all passionately want for our schools.

**Mr Poots:** I take it that the ethos for which you argue and which you support and the autonomy for that ethos is something that you would want for the voluntary grammar sector as well.

**Dr McKeown:** The voluntary grammar sector has a range of —

**Mr Poots:** I mean that you would not seek something for your own sector that you would not seek for another sector.

**Dr McKeown:** We have said that clearly. We have a clear set of documents about the Catholic ethos. The voluntary grammar sector is unified in that it has a particular status in legislation, but there is no agreed ethos for voluntary grammar schools, as far as I am

aware. As a former principal of one, I was not conscious of that.

They have a particular interest and structures, but I do not think that there is an agreed ethos for voluntary grammar schools, except in a comparatively limited sense. I think that we have a much broader sense of ethos; however, it is important that those groups of schools and individual schools have the right to be supported in gathering together where they have common interests, because it is all directed towards delivering quality outcomes.

**Mr Poots:** I take it, then, that you would envisage voluntary grammar schools being in existence for some time to come.

**Dr McKeown:** They are independent schools. What contribution they make to society and what role they play in the education system is a different matter, but they exist as individual schools, and their autonomy is precious to them and they have every right to maintain it.

**Sister Woulfe:** Mr Poots argued that the paymaster was the architect-in-chief of a school. The paymaster is responsible for the distribution of the public purse on behalf of the taxpayer, but that does not mean that the paymaster is the arbiter or the creator of the profile of school provision or ethos in a democracy. Democracy seeks to reflect the diversity of society, and that is the purpose of some of the changes. The other purpose — to which we subscribe in paragraph 8 of our submission — is that the Education Bill seeks to establish:

“a more streamlined, coherent and efficient system of education”.

That is the core. Everyone here wants an efficient, coherent education system that is not just value for money but also value for the young people in the education system. That does not mean one size fits all, but it places an obligation on the legislation and on the ESA, within its powers, to clarify the role of the constituent bodies and what demands are to be made of them so that some of them do not become privileged.

The voluntary principle of that devolution is particularly important, whether schools remain voluntary grammar or another kind of school.

**Mr Poots:** Bishop McKeown, in response to an earlier question, suggested that we need to provide “whatever it takes” to deal with the educational tail, but we do not have “whatever it takes”. Of a budget of £9 billion, education takes about £2 billion. We do not have much flexibility to provide “whatever it takes”.

Would you agree that you have a role to play in ensuring that education is provided more efficiently and at a lower cost-base than at present, given the diverse range of education that it is provided? Should you not co-operate fully to deliver education more efficiently so that more resources go to the youngsters who need them most? Should education not be about

children first and foremost rather than about ethos or faiths or anything else?

**Mr Gordon:** Following up on Mr Poots's last point, and I am sure that Mr Flanagan will visit this —

**The Chairperson:** He is a soft touch. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Gordon:** The Catholic sector has, vis-à-vis the education and library boards, provided value for money in representation and education. To return to the initial question, the commission believes that the Education Bill does not go far enough in certain areas. From answers to questions, from the Department's evidence to the Committee last week, from the Bain Report and the review of public administration (RPA) papers, it is clear that sectoral support bodies are necessary.

Since that is the case, and since sectoral bodies represent all sectors in education, why have they not been included in the Education Bill? It makes more sense to include them in it, as you will obtain the trust and confidence not just of the commission but of the Governing Bodies Association and the other sectors that have given evidence to the Committee.

**Dr Walsh:** Mr Poots spoke about children and ethos, among other things, and since he might have used a throwaway phrase I do not want to quote him exactly. However, putting children's education first and maintaining ethos do not exclude each other. It is important that children are educated in a school, not in a vacuum or even in a hedge school — even though I know that Dr McKeown would have prospered at one.

Children are educated in schools that have a certain thrust and character, and it is those factors that provide good education in a sector; therefore, they should not be separated out, Mr Poots. Ethos is an important factor in the good education of children, and for us, children are important. We have said that all along, and it is good that children are beginning to take centre stage in the education process. That is what is good for children.

**Mr Poots:** The reality is that many schools are exclusive.

**Dr Walsh:** That is another issue and not quite ad rem to this discussion.

**Mr McCausland:** I have three questions. First, as regards governors and their appointment, you said that at present the Department of Education and the education and library boards, in consultation with the trustees, appoint governors. When I sat on an education and library board school management committee, we were given a list of people who had been proposed as governors, and that list was essentially rubber-stamped. I assume that that list came from the CCMS. Why will it be any different under a new regime?

**Dr Walsh:** That is unknown. It has always been a question of names being suggested backwards and forwards; that is the kind of good consultation that we require.

**Mr McCausland:** In my experience, there was no backwards and forwards; it was simply a case of presenting a list to a board of governors to rubber-stamp.

**Dr Walsh:** Perhaps that was the fault of the education and library board.

**Mr McCausland:** There was mention that people from the Protestant community work for the CCMS. However, how many people from the Protestant community sit on the boards of governors of Catholic maintained schools?

**Dr Walsh:** I do not know whether we can answer that question. If the Department of Education suggested a person for the board of one of our schools who was not of our faith but who was fully in tune with the ethos of the school and who was clearly a good educationalist, we would have no problem.

**Dr Brady:** That question could be answered in the Committee's session with the CCMS.

**Dr McKeown:** I have worked with people from the Protestant and unionist community who were passionate members of boards of governors; that is my experience, and I am sure that it applies in other schools.

**Mr McCausland:** It would be useful to know.

Secondly, you said that if too many councillors were members of the board of the ESA, non-educational issues could be introduced and people could follow political priorities. No one in Northern Ireland is non-political; I have never found such a person. Everyone comes with some political agenda, whether they sit on a board as a politician or as a representative of some other sector. What sort of political issues do you see people pursuing? I find that difficult to envisage.

**Dr McKeown:** A major element is the planning of the schools estate — the development of new schools and amalgamations. We all have agendas. Inevitably, the agenda of a politician is to be elected, which is a very real part of the important role that political representatives play. I hope that decisions are taken that are not in the interests of people who depend on votes or who want to play to the tune of particular local groups — and I hope that that is the case within the CCMS. Our broad point is that we should ensure that pure, non-election-based agendas are always the dominant ones.

**Mr McCausland:** If I picked you up right, you are saying that you saw people pursuing political priorities and agendas on estate planning. Can you fill that out a bit more?

**Dr McKeown:** As someone who was never in the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB), Balmoral High School springs to mind as an example of when a school is put in a place where it is not needed in the long term. We are simply saying that it is important to ensure that the big picture is always kept in mind, not just the picture for the next four or five years.

**Mr McCausland:** Should the councillors on the board of the ESA reflect the political community? Likewise, should the other members on the board reflect the composition of the wider community?

**Dr McKeown:** How representatives are picked will be a matter for the Assembly — the d'Hondt system seems to be valid everywhere. We are also aware that the Education Bill, and certainly its associated documentation, talks about local committees. The last thing that we want is a Balkanisation of education due to the predominance of one community in particular areas. We are looking for a system that will serve the common good. Democracy has to be exercised on the ground. However, we know from our society that there is a danger of Balkanisation, which we want to avoid.

**Mr McCausland:** There was mention in passing to the current obligation to encourage and facilitate the Irish-medium and integrated sectors. What is your view on equality across the education sectors? Should it not be the responsibility of the state to encourage and facilitate all sectors, rather than giving what might be perceived as special attention to two sectors?

**Dr McKeown:** In 1989, the Irish-medium sector was miniscule and the integrated sector was also small. At that time, it was right to ensure that such small sectors were given encouragement. Whether such encouragement is required to the same extent 20 years on is another thing. John Gordon was saying that at least those two sectors are recognised on the face of legislation — the end of the CCMS will mean that there is no recognition of the Catholic-maintained sector anywhere on the face of legislation.

**Dr Brady:** In our presentation, we made clear our respect for diversity, and we said that that should be reflected in legislation and provision.

**Mr McCausland:** If one goes down the road of saying that all sectors should be treated on the basis of equality, then giving a particular commitment to facilitate and encourage one sector will draw a difference. It would be helpful to ascertain views on that from the various people who give evidence to us on the Bill. Do you favour a more general commitment that the state should be responsible for encouraging and facilitating all sectors?

**Dr McKeown:** I talked to the transferors at the meeting on Monday. They are concerned about how they can play an important role in developing the current ethos of the schools in which they are heavily involved

and to which they have made a huge commitment. Some will regard education supply as being divided, but we have produced a system that is, in global terms, good in many ways. The devolution to, and subsequent strength of, particular sectors is a source of strength, rather than being something of which we should rid ourselves.

**Miss McIlveen:** Having listened carefully to what you have said and having read your submission, my impression is that you feel under threat from the ESA. What discussions have you had with the Department about your concerns and what was its response?

**Dr Walsh:** For the past number of years, there has been ongoing communication with senior officials in the Department and we raised our concerns, which focus on employment issues. The Department's legal advisers gave their opinion; our adviser, Mr Gordon, also has a view, and, as was strongly hinted, the Governing Bodies Association also brought an adviser to the Committee.

Having listened to today's discussion, legal matters and the interpretation of law are becoming core issues. Is the Committee thinking about bringing some of the lawyers together, rather than hearing one view and then another? Perhaps the lawyers could tease out the legal issues in the presence of the Committee — is that too much to ask? Perhaps some members are lawyers.

**The Chairperson:** I do not want to be a referee at that meeting.

**Mr McCausland:** It would be an expensive meeting.

**Dr Walsh:** We would ask Mr Gordon not to charge a fee.

**The Chairperson:** Is that the basis on which he is here today? Perhaps I should not ask such questions.

**Miss McIlveen:** We could speak all day about ethos, and so forth, but, as someone who does not come from the same faith, I find it difficult to understand its importance. However, let us consider other models, particularly in Scotland, where schools are owned by the state but have maintained their Catholic faith and ethos. Have you spoken to your counterparts there or in other jurisdictions?

**Sister Woulfe:** Yes.

**Miss McIlveen:** Will you elaborate?

**Dr McKeown:** We meet the Scottish Catholic Education Service and their counterparts in England and Wales every year. In addition, we are part of a much bigger network of providers of Catholic schools throughout Europe. We are involved in ongoing dialogue, not only to maintain our existing system but to determine the best practical ways forward. The Scottish model provides one perspective, and our submission reflects that the right of minority groups of

schools to continue is guaranteed in legislation in various parts of these islands. We want to ensure that that continues to be the case here, because we wish to serve the common good, and the examination results that we produce demonstrate that we are doing so.

**Miss McIlveen:** From your written submission and what you have said today, I get the impression that you simply want to hold on to what you have and perhaps gain a bit more if you can during the period of transition, rather than being more progressive and considering what might be better for the wider Northern Ireland.

**Sister Woulfe:** With respect, Miss McIlveen, your comment misses the point. The issue is one of a commitment to providing education in Northern Ireland for all young people. However, there is also the recognition and commitment to offer options within that provision. That is part of the diversity. For some people, their vision of education contains certain nuances. People want to bring up their children in a particular cultural environment, and for many, that has a religious dimension, whereas for others it does not. I am thinking not only of Northern Ireland, but of Europe when I say that. We all recognise that we are living in a time of huge and rapid transition on this island.

It is not about grabbing what one can, so to speak; it is about offering something for the common good in schools that promote an ethos with a particular vision of, and purpose in, life. These schools are open to all, not just to children whose families are from the Catholic tradition. They are open to anyone who wishes to participate in them. It is also open to participating in communities of learning, which are very much part of the emerging context in this part of the island.

You asked whether we have studied what is happening in Catholic schools in other parts of the world. We have. You mentioned the Scottish model, which arose from early twentieth-century legislation. In recent times, there has been significant legislation in England and Wales. Furthermore, legislators in France, Belgium, Holland, Spain and Italy have worked on the matter, and, as well as having state systems, those countries have state-funded diverse education systems.

The place of religion in those countries varies according to the jurisdiction. However, a religious ethos is not just founded on the faith dimension, nor is it just about the period of worship; it informs how things, such as discipline, are done. There is a dialogue between faith and culture; it is not about indoctrination, because education is fundamentally not about indoctrination; it is about enabling people to be critical thinkers at an appropriate age. For example, four-year olds are not critical thinkers in the same way as 24-year olds.

There are different forms of education, and a one-size-fits-all system would do nothing for society. In any kind of democracy, one must allow for diverse voices, and that is partly why we are here. Although we represent Catholic interests, we do not deny the value of other interests as education providers — we endorse them. We mentioned the controlled sector, the Irish-medium sector, the integrated sector and the transferors, and we acknowledge the value of them all. In some ways, we recognise the value of them working alone; however, in other ways, we see the value of them working together, and that is happening. That is why support is required for each sector here, and, in order to ensure that that support is healthy and accountable, it must be integrated in legislation.

**The Chairperson:** Roman Catholic schools became part of the state system in Scotland in 1926, and that was followed by the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and so on. In light of that, do you believe that the ethos of those schools was diminished in any way? Further to the point raised by Michelle McIlveen, I am interested in the comments in your submission about explicit legal recognition in other jurisdictions with respect to the critical link between employment and ethos. Do you believe that the ethos of Roman Catholic schools was diminished in any way, because that brings us back to the fundamental issue with which we started — employment fears? Last Thursday in Dungannon, the Cardinal publicly stated his concerns about preserving the ethos of schools.

**Sister Woulfe:** I think you are talking about a question of principle. The Scottish model has worked well.

**The Chairperson:** That is something that we would be interested to see.

**Sister Woulfe:** I have here ‘Religion, Education & the Law: A Comparative Approach’, which some of you might find interesting.

**The Chairperson:** I shall delegate Nelson McCausland to read that and report back next week. *[Laughter.]*

Finally, Cardinal Brady said something about which I wish to ask a question. I apologise to the other witnesses about the way that the session has run on; however, it is vital that we have this discussion. In the Cardinal’s opening remarks, he said that clause 3 is unacceptable. If we were not able to convince the Department and the Minister to make changes that could satisfy the concerns that have been raised today and those that were raised with us last week by the GBA, what would the effect be? It might be difficult to answer that, but given that you said that clause 3 was unacceptable —

**Dr Brady:** It is unacceptable in its present form.

**The Chairperson:** Yes.

**Dr Brady:** Today's meeting gives us cause for hope that by having genuine listening, as you said, and a profitable and fruitful exchange of views, we will arrive at a situation in which the legislation is acceptable. That is the point of the exercise, but we will cross that bridge when we come to it.

**The Chairperson:** I thank you and your delegation, Cardinal. You are welcome to stay while we hear from the representatives of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).

**Dr Brady:** I thank you and the Committee for listening genuinely.

**The Chairperson:** If members agree, I propose that, because of time constraints, we postpone the presentation from the departmental officials, if they will be kind enough to accede to that request. It is not that I am putting them in the sin bin — I am very conscious of that. We are also due to have a very important presentation from the Education and Training Inspectorate.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am conscious that the media are interested in the Department's presentation. Is it possible, if the officials' attendance is to be postponed, to make the relevant documents public?

**The Chairperson:** I meant to say to the Cardinal's delegation before they left the table that we have a departmental response to their submission and that we will make that available to both delegations and the press, because it is now in the public domain. Are members content with course of action?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson:** I apologise to the departmental officials about that. I welcome Bishop McAreavey, Mr Donal Flanagan and his team. We are looking forward to a soft touch from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). You have been at the centre of some jesting this morning, but I hope that it was all taken in good humour. There is a great deal of commonality on many of the issues that have been raised. I ask you to make your presentation, after which members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

**Most Reverend John McAreavey, Bishop of Dromore (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools):** Thank you, Chairperson. We appreciate having the opportunity to address the Committee, and we hope that we will be able to bring some clarity to the issues that have already been discussed this morning.

I will introduce the members of our delegation. Mr Donal Flanagan is the chief executive of CCMS; Mr Jim Clarke is the deputy chief executive, and Ms La'Verne Montgomery is the head of human resources and corporate services.

It is the case that we are in broad agreement with the views expressed by the trustees, both in their written submission and oral evidence. The views of the CCMS come from more direct hands-on experience than that of bishops or trustees, who, in the nature of things, are a little bit more removed from the classroom and day-to-day administration of schools. It is from that experience that our contribution will be made.

My colleagues, as you probably know, or will discover, are well able to speak for themselves. Whether they take a gentle touch or not, as a trustee and chair of the council of the CCMS, I think that they have acted over the years as they believed necessary and appropriate. By and large, that has been through influence and in trying to be supportive.

Of course, as with any organisation, there were times and situations in which fairly decisive action was judged necessary. History will show that such actions were taken for the benefit of schools, teachers and pupils. I will hand over to Jim Clarke, who will make the main presentation.

**Mr Jim Clarke (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools):** As a regional body, the CCMS agrees with the RPA proposals and agrees that they have the potential to deliver a more coherent and efficient support and administrative framework for education. However, centralised administration should not mean centralised control.

The Bill is incomplete and lacks clarity. Those facts make it difficult for the CCMS to develop a full understanding of the intentions and implications at this time. At present, we do not have sight of the second Bill. Therefore, proposals on matters such as accountable autonomy, area-based planning and governance are not available to us. Members will have noted from the previous conversation that much of the debate is about how accountable autonomy will look and how it will operate.

Furthermore, we are confused about the Bill's lack of clarity on employment, the selection of community governors and the roles and responsibilities of sectoral support bodies. The CCMS believes that the purpose of schools should be to provide a high-quality education in which parents and pupils can have confidence. It should be an education system that is clearly linked to Northern Ireland's emerging economy and changing society. In order to ensure that that happens, all sectors should have access to the range of supports that they need, bearing in mind — as Mr Poots might remind us — the costs.

I will focus on three main areas: the need for clarity on the roles of the education and skills authority and boards of governors in the employment of teachers; the importance of the need for clarity on the roles and responsibilities of sectoral support bodies, and

their relationship to the ESA and schools' boards of governors; and, the critical area of raising standards. We are happy to answer questions on other aspects of our evidence.

The first issue is the role of the ESA and boards of governors in the employment of teachers. The council is anxious to secure that there is clarity in the legislation and associated guidance in order to ensure equality, whereby each sector must provide schools that reflect parents' desire for a particular educational ethos — be it Catholic, other faith-based, integrated, secular or Irish-medium. At present, there is confusion in the language of the Bill. References to the "employing authority" or "employer" seem to relate only to ESA's role. Indeed, those terms are almost interchangeable in the Bill.

There is no clear statement on the roles that will be discharged by boards of governors, and there is no umbrella terminology to describe what those roles might be. That omission is exacerbated by the lack of detail on the meaning of accountable autonomy and on how that concept will function. It is important that schools appoint teachers — particularly leaders — who have a commitment to the ethos regardless of their own background, in order to achieve and maintain high standards.

Boards of governors must have significant influence over the appointment and management of staff. We have been told that the ESA will be the *de jure* employer or employing authority whereas boards of governors will be the *de facto* employer on all practical matters. Those roles must be clarified and confirmed in legislation or in guidance.

The CCMS regards accountable autonomy as a significant opportunity for all schools to have the potential to access a more extensive range of responsibilities than those that are available under the current voluntary principle. However, that voluntary principle is not available to all schools. We believe that schools should have the potential to aspire to, or earn, that greater level of autonomy, and accountability aspects must be reflected in that. It should empower with a view to, primarily, raising standards rather than constraining, but we need detail on how that issue might operate.

It is important that there is equality in the proposals. The CCMS believes that the Catholic sector and the controlled sector should have the same legal protections that are available to the integrated and Irish-medium sectors, as was suggested in the outcomes of the working group on establishing a culture of tolerance. The Catholic sector is not asking for anything that should not be available to other sectors.

CCMS believes that all sectors should have access to a support body with a range of functions that are consistent with the needs and responsibilities of the sector. In the case of the Catholic sector, those are well outlined in policy paper 21, with the exception of the role of raising standards, which I will refer to later. Those responsibilities, in addition to the role of raising standards, include: developing ethos; an advocacy role on behalf of the sector; clarity on the role of school owners in the planning and provision of schools under an area-based planning process, managed, after the second Bill has been implemented, by the ESA acting as a neutral body; and the supporting of schools and the appointment of teachers, particularly at leadership levels.

All those functions are based on ensuring the effectiveness of every school in the sector, imbued by the ethos of that sector, recognised in the schemes of management and employment. The experience of the CCMS has been that ethos adds value, and improvement in the sector appears to support that position. We believe that sectoral support is valuable, it should be available to every sector, and its functions and relationships should be explicit in the Bill. The sectoral support body exists to assist schools. The Catholic sector also wishes that all of its schools be recognised as Catholic, grant-aided schools. That issue will be addressed in the second Bill.

The final issue is that of raising standards. Every child is entitled to a high quality education at a good school. Raising standards needs to be an explicit role of the ESA, the sectoral body and the individual school. However, only the schools can deliver directly on the raising of standards. Clause 34 needs to include reference to the sectoral support body as well as to the ESA in respect of raising standards and to clarify the respective roles and relationships of each of those bodies on the important issue of raising standards.

The CCMS was created primarily because trustees and Government had concerns about standards. We know that standards have improved, and it is important to analyse how that came about. Some of the characteristics of that change include: the importance of an agreed and shared ethos; the value of employing people committed to that ethos; the value of the ethos in addressing underperformance and aspiring to high standards, and the importance of support which understands and promotes the ethos. The experience of the CCMS should give confidence to other sectors that, with the proper conditions in place, standards can be raised.

CCMS will be gone, but it wants the new arrangements to work effectively. To ensure that they do, there must be: an understanding of the objectives of the proposed changes, particularly with respect to improving educational outcomes; an acceptance of the diversities

of pluralist society and of the need to provide for those equally; a recognition of the importance of ethos and the added value that it brings to each sector; a clarity in legislation and guidance on the roles of boards of governors in the employment of teachers and the nature and functioning of accountable autonomy; and a recognition of the role of school owners in the framing of schemes of management and employment, the selection of community governors committed to the ethos of the school and the planning and provision of schools.

Governance arrangements should be effective and competent to do the job and be free from politicisation. Thank you, Chairperson.

**The Chairperson:** We always seem to return to either clause 8 or clause 3, which are fundamental to those concerned. With respect to the point I made earlier to the commission delegation on clause 8, if there were to be built in some appeal or regulation of control, do you think it would go any way towards addressing concerns over employment schemes and schemes of management?

**Mr Donal Flanagan (Chief Executive, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools):** When this exercise started, our first meeting was with Angela Smith and we explained the issues to her. She said that it was not beyond the wit of man to create a difference between an employing authority as employers *de jure* and a board of governors as employers *de facto*. Jim has said that there is not enough clarity in the legislation in relation to the role of boards of governors. If that role were clarified, we might make some progress.

The legislation contains a requirement for the ESA to approve the scheme of management and the scheme of employment. That is not a difficulty. To create a difference between the employer and the employing authority, we can give the ESA a statutory role to support the board of governors in the exercise of its function as employer.

That would provide a degree of consistency and accountability throughout the system; that is what I call a “light touch”. In other words, the ESA would not have to control it, but it could advise on how it works. If people followed that advice, they will not get into trouble; if people wilfully ignore that advice, they should not be indemnified. There is an opportunity to create a difference between an employing authority and an employer *de jure*.

**The Chairperson:** Are you aware of any examples of similar practices that could be used in the education sector?

**Mr Flanagan:** The closest to it is the example that exists in the CCMS; we are the lead employer, but we do not exercise that with a heavy hand. Boards of governors are responsible for the employment of

teachers, and they exercise that role by using advice that is given to them by the CCMS. We have seldom inhibited a board of governors from exercising its will; we have done so only when people were acting in a silly manner.

With a minor extension to the CCMS’s role, we could create what the voluntary grammar, the Catholic maintained, the integrated and Irish-medium and, I expect, many in the controlled sector have and want in future.

**Ms La’Verne Montgomery (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools):** Schedules 7 and 8 are minor amendments to current legislation, including the removal of schedule 2 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. That relates to the staff of controlled and Catholic maintained schools with delegated budgets and covers discipline and grievance under a board of governors control, the right to suspend employees and provisions in relation to dismissals. We presume that those functions will be provided for elsewhere; as yet, however, they are not, and that is our concern. The omission may imply a change in the authority of boards of governors in respect of discipline, grievance and dismissal. In effect, that would remove those employer functions from boards of governors and, presumably, pass them to the ESA. There is a need to clarify those points, generally and particularly, in relation to any model in a scheme of management or scheme of employment.

**The Chairperson:** That is helpful in view of the concern that exists about the revisions of employment schemes. I am sure that the thought will send shudders through the maintained sector, but if I were a teacher in a maintained school and was dismissed, against whom would I take a grievance? Would I take it against the CCMS or the Department? That will provide clarity on concerns that are being raised all the time. If the CCMS is the employer — as is the case at present — but the Department has responsibilities, on whose door would I knock if I wanted to take someone to court and get my compensation?

**Mr Flanagan:** If you were appointed as a teacher in a CCMS school, you would be a good teacher, and the likelihood of your being dismissed would be slim. However, if you were dismissed for doing something that was not correct, your representation would be against the CCMS.

**Ms Montgomery:** It would be against the board of governors in the first instance; the CCMS would be co-joined.

**The Chairperson:** How would that change if the CCMS functions were transferred to the ESA? That is the nub of the matter.

**Mr Flanagan:** The difference is that we do not know how the ESA will exercise its employing

authority; there is no clarity on the role of boards of governors. We have clarity, evidence of good practice, and evidence of delegating considerable amounts of autonomy to local level.

We have heard about accountable autonomy, but we have not seen it; we do not know how it will work, and it has never been described to me in any discussion with anyone.

**The Chairperson:** Trevor said that, from his observation, he can see no problem. However, clause 3 states:

“All teachers and other persons who are appointed to work under a contract of employment on the staff of a grant-aided school shall be employed by ESA.”

Therefore if I were employed by the ESA and a problem arose — taking La’Verne’s comments about clause 7 into account — I would knock on the door of the ESA. I would not take a board of governors to court; I would take the ESA to court.

**Mr Flanagan:** The ESA will be a statutory body whose make-up will be largely political. Equally, we can work on the basis that the make-up of that statutory body will not necessarily support any one sector or be committed to any one ethos. The CCMS has been appointed as a statutory body to support the maintenance and standards of Catholic maintained schools, so there are people in that organisation who are sensitive and committed to working towards the promotion of the Catholic ethos. They are not all from the Catholic denomination.

The difficulty is that we do not know how the ESA will interpret its role as the employing authority; if the ESA were given that authority, it would be a matter for it to interpret. There is no clarity on how it might wish to do that. That is our concern and our fear.

The ESA is not necessarily a problem, but the ESA operating in a neutral manner would be a problem.

**Mr J Clarke:** The issue is one of clarity — and clause 3 lacks clarity. Its title is:

“ESA to employ all staff of grant-aided schools”

and it also refers to the ESA as the employer. It may not be legally correct, but, in common parlance, the roles that boards of governors play in the Catholic maintained sector is that of employer while the CCMS is the employing authority. If the ESA were both employing authority and employer, what will the role of boards of governors be and how will that be affected by the operation of accountable autonomy? Accountable autonomy is an important driver in raising standards. We want boards of governors to show the qualities, enthusiasm and commitment to take authority because they want to do better for their schools.

**The Chairperson:** That is useful, but I have a query. You raised concerns, as I did earlier, about

community governors, will you expand on those concerns? In paragraph 6.2 of your submission you refer to persons living and working in the local community and state:

“Council believes it may be worth questioning if this is still a realistic understanding”.

**Mr Flanagan:** There are two issues. One is the process of selection, to which Bishop Walsh referred this morning. That should be done “in consultation with”, and despite what Nelson may have seen or heard at the Belfast board, that list of names was produced after a great deal of preparation and discussion with the relevant officers from both bodies; those names were selected “in consultation with”. That is an issue about process. If the ESA appoints people “in consultation with”, I do not see any concerns for the future.

Commitment is an issue. A community governor would have to be sensitive to, comfortable with, and committed to the promotion of the Catholic ethos in a Catholic school. It would be a very disruptive board of governors if individuals disagreed openly about something that is so important to the running of a school.

**The Chairperson:** Ethos is not included in the definition of “community”; the Bill refers to someone living and working in the local community. Are we clear about what is meant by “community”?

People have different interpretations and definitions of community. Do you not see that that could cause problems?

**Mr J Clarke:** In our submission we asked for clarity on that matter because of the differing circumstances of our schools — about one third of our schools are now recognised as extended schools. We see education linked to other public services, particularly health and social services and community development. Those issues should be reflected in schools to recognise an area’s circumstances. Strategies and people should be in place who understand how relationships and links can be developed to enhance education generally and the community in particular.

**Mr O’Dowd:** Bishop McAreavey, you and your colleagues are very welcome. Today’s debate has revolved around the role of boards of governors, the employing authority and the employment rights of boards of governors. Donal, you said that the employing authority is the CCMS. If it came to your attention as the employing authority that the employment practices of a board of governors were outside the law, would you act?

**Mr Flanagan:** Yes.

**Mr O’Dowd:** Why, then, would you not expect the ESA to act in future if it came to its attention that a board of governors was acting outside the law?

**Mr Flanagan:** If the ESA were the employing authority, I would expect it to act. If it were the body that provided statutory advice to schools, it would have to ask the board of governors to account for the breach of statutory advice but not necessarily employment law. There is a slight difference. Either way, however, intervention is needed when people act inappropriately or in a wilful manner.

*(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr D Bradley] in the Chair)*

**Mr O'Dowd:** There was a wee bit of noise, so I am not sure whether we are contradicting each other. Are we?

**Mr Flanagan:** No. We started this process with a discussion about the employing authority and the employer; at that stage, the Minister said that it was not beyond the wit of man to have clear blue water between them. If the role of governors was clarified and determined, we would be having a slightly different argument about the interface between the ESA as the employing authority and the board of governors as the employer. We do not have that clarity and division between the two. In the absence of that, it is better for the board of governors to be the employer than it would be for the ESA.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Under your proposals, there would be several hundred employing authorities rather than one, because each board of governors would be an employing authority. That would be a logistical nightmare.

I would like to ask about representation at a tribunal or in a court of law in relation to employment matters. I understand that the CCMS carries out the ethos, which is fair enough. However, a barrister before a tribunal — regardless of their ethos — advocates the law and defends a case based on law, not on ethos: no legal defence can be based on ethos.

**Mr Flanagan:** There are two issues. One is about the plethora of schools that we would have, but we have that at the minute: there are 1,300 schools and 1,300 boards of governors. Many of them do extremely good jobs in raising standards and in ensuring and supporting the welfare of children, so why not take the next step and give them responsibility for the employing authority role? Advice and support would be available to them from the ESA.

You must remember that this process was about mopping up and tying up administration, not changing the system.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I disagree.

**Mr Flanagan:** The review of public administration came about to reduce the amount of administration in education — not necessarily to threaten anybody or to get rid of anything that was good but to provide a more coherent and efficient way of working. We can do that, and the CCMS has demonstrated — through its practice

over the past 20 years — that it is capable of handling more responsibilities to boards of governors.

It is not the Assembly, the Education Committee, the Department of Education, Donal Flanagan or anybody else who raises standards: schools raise standards, and unless you bring decision-making down to that level, whether with finance or the employment of staff, you will not raise standards. Some schools are extremely good at exercising that degree of autonomy, and many others are capable of it, and some schools would need more support than others. However, the ESA, which will have a statutory duty to provide advice and guidance on a range of issues, will have the authority to intervene.

I may give the impression of having something other than a light touch; however, I do not have the authority to go into a school or to direct anybody to do anything. I use influence, advice and guidance. By exercising their responsibilities based on that advice and guidance, boards of governors have demonstrated that they do not act wilfully; therefore, I can indemnify and defend them in any court of law. As La'Verne said, when a barrister joins us on a particular case, he co-joins the board of governors and the CCMS. That is what would happen in relation to the ESA.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes; but a barrister defends you on the basis of the law, not on the basis of an ethos. I admire the work of the CCMS; however, why does it never delegate employment authority to the boards of governors?

**Mr Flanagan:** It is not within the legislation for us to do that.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not remember it being lobbied for either. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Flanagan:** We have argued for it. We embraced the review of public administration because it would allow us to go to the next stage and delegate responsibility to the boards of governors. We have talked about the strength of governors and how they are selected, and we firmly believe that good schools have good governors. If you pick good governors who can manage properly, you will have a good school. Therefore give governors more power and responsibility to allow them to do their job.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** You talked about delegation, which brings us back to the question of autonomy. We have three different forms of terminology: maximised autonomy; maximised supported autonomy; and accountable autonomy. Are we talking about the same thing?

**Mr J Clarke:** I hope so. As you say, the language has changed. I reiterate my earlier point: what we need is clarity so that we know precisely what we mean when we talk about the employing authority role of the

ESA, the role that boards of governors will have as employers, and the role that, over time, might be devolved to boards of governors, depending on the desire and capability of a board. If you encourage people to take responsibility and make them accountable, they will do a better job. In answer to John's question, had accountable autonomy — in whatever terminology — been around, several boards of governors and several clusters of schools in the maintained sector could have operated a devolved model. We would like to encourage that.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Donal is right. We talked about the ESA being a major part of the RPA and the streamlining of administration, and we were told that savings of £20 million would be directed into front-line services. That is now in doubt. As Mrs Bradley said, the Department's emphasis has changed and is now on raising standards, which was the CCMS's *raison d'être* when it started out. You have been successful in that and you suggest that the sectoral body that replaces you should continue to have a role in raising standards. Presumably the ESA will retain its role in raising standards. What degree and what form of co-operation will work between a sectoral body with some responsibility for raising standards and the ESA?

**Mr J Clarke:** That requires clarity. The ESA is the body responsible for raising standards generally through its support and challenge functions. The challenge function has not been played, except by the CCMS; we played it with a light touch and largely outside any legislative role that we have had. However, we have done that because, under our ethos, every child is entitled to a good education. When we face difficulties, we have, metaphorically, wrapped the arms of that ethos around the situation and told people that they have a responsibility to the children in their care. We do not think that that will change.

I do not want to introduce differentials, but the education and library boards have said that it is not their role to challenge; however, we believe that it is everyone's role to challenge and that that is implicit in raising standards. If there has been a differential, the CCMS has challenged schools, and we have used that challenge role to try and raise standards. Some other sectors might not have done that.

It must be asked whether the neutral position or that of influence based on ethos has been more successful. Every sector should have that backup, and the ESA should be able to call on backup from a sectoral support body to support it in finding a way into a school or board of governors that a neutral external body simply might not be able to do. That is good for value for money if it achieves better outcomes for children and for education services.

**Mr Flanagan:** Earlier, we talked about having good governors in schools. If, for example, the problem at a school is the governors, the sectoral support body can have huge influence through the trustees' nominations, through the ESA's nomination or through community nominations to begin to change a board of governors. We have effected such change on a number of occasions in the past 20 years. We have moved people out of boards of governors and put new people on boards midstream. That is one of the great advantages that a sectoral support body has, because it will have the ear of the body of the trustees who have the ownership role at schools.

*(The Chairperson [Mr Storey] in the Chair)*

**Mr McCausland:** The CCMS is a statutory body. How is its membership constituted?

**Mr Flanagan:** It is a constituted body of 36 members, 20 of whom are nominated by the trustees. Of those 20, 10 are directly nominated by the trustees and the remaining 10 are selected from people who have a contribution to make to education — academics, heads of institutions, business people, former assistant secretaries at the Department of Education or prominent people in the Protestant community.

The Department of Education selects eight people by public advertisement. Four parent governors are selected on the basis that they are selected at local level — one cannot be a parent governor on the CCMS if one has not been selected at local level. A list of names is submitted from each of the dioceses. Similarly, people elected as teacher representatives in their own schools can come forward for selection to the CCMS.

**Mr McCausland:** Therefore, 20 appointments come through the trustees, eight come through the Department, four are parents and four are teachers.

**Mr Flanagan:** That is correct.

**Mr McCausland:** Earlier, a question was asked about the boards of governors at Catholic-maintained schools. How many people from the Protestant community are on boards of governors in schools in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Flanagan:** As you might expect, I do not have that information; nor do we gather it. We have anecdotal evidence. For instance, a school, which I cannot name, had lots of difficulties, and, as part of our intervention strategy, we created space — for want of a better word — on the board of governors. I went to a person who was not from the Catholic denomination but who has tremendous educational credibility. He went on to that board of governors and his influence was fundamental to making differences to the school. I have done that on a number of occasions. I select people on the basis that they are able to do a particular job.

Equally, there are Catholic schools in which a significant number of children from other denominations are present, and people of those denominations have opportunities, through parental representation, to be members of that board of governors. I cannot give any exact detail, but I can say that through departmental representation, education and library board representation, trustee representation and parent representation, a significant number of people from other denominations sit on the boards of governors of Catholic schools.

**Mr McCausland:** I appreciate that you do not have exact figures, but most people would expect you to have some sense of the general picture: would it be 1%, 5%, 50%; what would be the overall figure?

**Mr Flanagan:** I would say that it is less than 5%.

**Mr McCausland:** Is it much less than 5% — less than 5% could be one in 1,000; or it might be 0.1% — can you estimate?

**Mr Flanagan:** It is probably more than 1%, and less than 5%. I would need to do a lot of work and survey the boards of governors of all of our schools to answer that. However, there is no exclusion on people who are sensitive to and committed to the promotion of ethos. The acceptance of office allows people to say that they are committed to and will work within the policies of the Catholic school.

**Mr McCausland:** I am asking this question because people in the Protestant community do not have a detailed understanding of the internal workings of the Catholic sector. Therefore, I do not wish to be in any way problematic, I simply want to get an understanding of the prevailing situation.

**Mrs O'Neill:** You are obviously committed to equality of opportunity in the Catholic employment sector. One issue that you raised in your submission centres on maintaining ethos, which has been rehearsed many times today. In particular, you are seeking assurances about the Department's powers — in clause 5(2) and clause 12 — as regards fair employment legislation; for example, whether it would have the power to make change. Any change to fair-employment legislation can only be taken forward through OFMDFM; it would not be in the remit of the Department of Education.

The Department's paper states that the provisions give it very limited powers to modify employment law to facilitate the operation of the employment arrangements in the Bill. It has suggested also that it is not aware of any need to modify employment law in that regard, and it has no plans to do so. Is that sufficient reassurance for you; or do you want to see something stronger?

**Ms Montgomery:** That is very helpful. Obviously, it is not in the Bill as currently drafted. Our concern about the exemption is more to do with administration in relation to appointments. We have 500 appointments a year, and I can count the number of tribunals that would be lodged in one year on the fingers of one hand. We are concerned that if the exemption were removed, it may bring an influx of tribunals, not necessarily on merit — that is a reality of life.

Our position is that we advocate very strongly the retention of the exemption in relation to teacher appointments.

**Mr Lunn:** I wanted to make the same point. I am perfectly happy with the response, so I will not trouble you with a question.

**Mr D Bradley:** Are there teachers employed in Catholic schools who do not subscribe to the Catholic faith who are not Catholics?

**Mr Flanagan:** Yes.

**Ms Montgomery:** We do not gather information on people's religious denomination, but our understanding is that there are people who are not of the Catholic faith.

**Mr D Bradley:** Are those people in leadership roles as well as in classrooms?

**Mr J Clarke:** Yes.

**Ms Montgomery:** Again, that is anecdotal information as opposed to anything that we gather on a formal basis.

**The Chairperson:** I thought that, given Donal's recommendation earlier, I was going to be appointed.

**Mr Flanagan:** I said only if you were good enough. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McCausland:** Does everyone who is appointed have to subscribe to promoting the ethos of the Catholic sector?

**Ms Montgomery:** We have a Catholic vision, to which all of our schools have effectively signed up, and we make reference to that in our advertisements for appointments, both in the 'Irish News' and on our website. Any teacher who applies for a post in a Catholic-maintained school knows exactly what they are signing up to and what the school believes in.

**Mr McCausland:** If someone were applying in response to an advertisement to be a member of the board of the CCMS, would they have to subscribe to the ethos?

**Ms Montgomery:** That would be determined by the criteria that the Department of Education sets for governors.

**Mr J Clarke:** Our point is not just about the Catholic ethos; it is also about the integrated ethos, the Irish-

medium ethos and all others. If people commit to an ethos, they will bring value to it. Therefore, it is important to encourage people to understand an ethos so that they can commit to it.

**The Chairperson:** Paragraph 9.3 of your submission states:

“Council would seek assurance on the standing of such bodies preferably through some formal recognitions in the Bill.”

Does that arise due to lack of clarity in the Department’s policy paper 21 or is it due to more fundamental concerns on the role of sectoral support bodies?

**Mr J Clarke:** The function of policy paper 21 is to describe the main functions of sectoral support bodies; it does not say anything about their legal standing. At the beginning of the process, the given wisdom was that since the ESA would be the administrative arm of education, some of the functions that are currently with the CCMS and other bodies would be brought under the ESA’s influence. However, if sectoral support bodies are to play their role effectively and complement, rather than compete with, the ESA, their functions need to be clarified for themselves, boards of governors and the ESA. Commission members made the important point that there should be some mechanism whereby their voice is heard by boards of governors, especially on matters concerning the improvement of standards in schools.

**Mr Flanagan:** Bishop Walsh said that if we have such a body, its role and connection with boards of governors should be clearly spelt out or it will begin to disappear.

**The Chairperson:** I thank you all for taking the time to come to the Committee and endure the marathon that we have had this morning. The meeting has been useful and profitable. As there is a crossover between yourselves and the issues raised by the commission, I hope that you feel that you have had the opportunity to raise your concerns, both in your submission and in oral evidence. We will ensure that you get a copy of the Department’s response. If you have outstanding issues that you want to raise with us, we are quite happy to receive comments from the CCMS.

**Dr McAreavey:** We appreciate that your task is a very difficult one, and we would be glad to help in any way we can.

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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

25 March 2009

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### EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

#### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Mr Nelson McCausland  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr John O'Dowd  
Michelle O'Neill  
Mr Edwin Poots

#### Witnesses:

Mr Chris Stewart	} Department of Education
Ms Eve Stewart	
Mr John McGrath	

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** We now move on to the departmental representatives' presentation. I ask John, Chris and Eve to base their presentation on their response to the issues that the union representatives have raised. We will then move to the issues that were raised by the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schooles (CCMS) at last week's meeting. As members will recall, we were unable to get to that "rebuttal" due to time constraints. John, you are welcome once again; I hope that you did not have withdrawal symptoms having not been able to participate in last week's session.

**Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):** We were deeply disappointed about that.

**The Chairperson:** I am sure that you were.

**Mr McGrath:** We were drowning our sorrows all of last Wednesday. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:** Was that not St Patrick's Day? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McGrath:** Wednesday mornings would not be the same if we were not here.

I propose to make some opening remarks about the evidence given by our trade union colleagues. Chris Stewart will follow that with detailed comments on the paper that we have submitted. We will adopt the same approach in the second session.

I wish to provide clarification on some of the points that came up in this morning's session and, particularly, in relation to Dominic's questions. We have made it clear in recent months that the education and skills authority (ESA) primary, if not exclusive, objective is to raise standards. There is also an agenda to produce efficiencies through the centralisation of functions and the reduction of needless bureaucracy.

The Minister has made the objective to raise overall standards and close the gap in standards very explicit, and she has cited particular problems in particular sectors. The main vehicle for achieving that objective will be built around the school improvement policy. That will come in the final version of 'Every School a Good School', which is expected to be published shortly. The literacy and numeracy strategy is also linked to the achievement of that objective.

We see the ESA's role as one of providing help, support and, where necessary, a challenge function. That challenge function will be relevant when there is evidence in the ETI reports that schools are underperforming or could do better. In conjunction with the Inspectorate, the ESA will be responsible for providing that challenge function. We see some of that role as being the same as the role played by the CCMS in the maintained sector in past years. The CCMS had a role in driving up standards in the Catholic-maintained sector, and the statistics for that period provide evidence of that.

As I have said, there is an agenda to produce greater efficiencies. Through recent Assembly Questions, and in comments to the Committee, we have made it clear that there can be no guarantee that savings will automatically go to front line services, because we may well have to meet savings targets. However, if we may have savings targets of between 3% and 4% in the education budget and the ESA is a better vehicle by which to identify and secure those savings, that is still protecting front line services because, if the ESA does not make savings in back-office services, they will have to come out of front line services.

An environment in which we have greater efficiency targets heightens the importance of that objective of the ESA; it does not reduce it, which was the implication of Dominic's interpretation. It is still a major objective of the ESA to drive out savings. It may well be that a starker environment will be created, and that savings may have to be returned to the centre if some of the prognosis around the overall state of the

Northern Ireland block comes to pass in the coming years. It is important to make that point.

The need to drive out savings — particularly from support services — is of no lesser importance. If savings are not made in that area, and a levy of 3% to 3.5% is applied in the future, there will be no areas left from which to make those savings, except from front line services. Therefore, the issue is still about investing in front line services or, as far as possible, protecting front line services. I wanted to make remarks on savings and on standards before Chris deals with the specific details of our trade union colleagues' evidence.

**Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education):**

Thank you. First, we very much welcome the opportunity to respond to the points that our trade union colleagues have made. We also welcome the very detailed and thoughtful submissions that they have brought to the Committee: they have clearly invested a great deal of time and effort in closely studying the proposals.

For once, I do not believe that there will be much rebuttal. It is clear from the papers and from the oral evidence given by the trade unions that there is a great deal that we agree on. I will not attempt to deal with all of the issues raised in the trade unions' papers, but I will concentrate on the main ones. We will be happy to answer any questions, or expand on any of the issues raised.

On the issue of the employment arrangements, the Department welcomes the support offered by trade union colleagues on the proposed role of the ESA as the employing authority for all staff in grant-aided schools. Clearly, there are some aspects of the proposed employment arrangements that we do not agree upon, and I will come to those later. However, we do welcome the overall support for the core arrangements.

In relation to the membership of the ESA, the Minister has noted the views expressed by trade unions on the number and composition of the proposed membership, and the involvement of district councillors. Indeed, similar points have been expressed by Members in recent weeks, and the Minister wants to carefully consider all of those views. However, at present, the Minister remains of the view that a membership of 12 is sufficient for effective leadership and governance. The Minister also feels that the proposal for a majority of members to be district councillors is important to ensure local democratic accountability.

Trade union colleagues have suggested that a proportion of the ESA membership should be reserved for trade union representatives. The present legislation and policy make it clear that membership of the ESA and appointment to that body will primarily be on the principle of merit. Trade union representatives can of course apply for appointment, but I draw the

Committee's attention to the provision in schedule 1, paragraph 5(5), of the Bill, which prevents a member of the ESA from also being an employee of the ESA. However that, in itself, does not prevent trade union representatives from applying for membership. All members will be appointed on the basis of their competence and experience rather than on the basis of any formal representative capacity.

The Minister also notes that formally reserving a proportion of the membership for trade union representatives could give rise to a conflict of interest for those members in management and trade union matters.

On the issue of employment schemes and the role of the submitting authority, a number of points were made in the written and oral presentations about the need for schemes and the administrative burden that those might represent for schools. Also addressed was whether there ought to be scope for schools to tailor those schemes, or whether a single scheme should be imposed on all schools.

The Minister does not agree with the view of trade union colleagues that the requirement for schools to produce schemes is a bureaucratic burden. In fact, the Department views those schemes as an essential element of the employment arrangements in the Bill. The schemes will be in place to ensure that there is clarity on the respective roles and responsibilities of the ESA and boards of governors. In that, it is important to have those schemes in place, and they are in the best interest of education staff. The ESA will produce model schemes, which schools will be free to adopt if they wish to do so. In doing so, those schools can minimise the administrative burden that will be placed upon them.

The responsibility for preparing and submitting schemes will be given to schools, which is in keeping with the policy aim of allowing schools to determine the degree of autonomy that they wish to have on employment matters. In recent weeks, members have heard the views of various stakeholders who have stressed the importance and value of an autonomous role for boards of governors. The Department's agreement with that position is reflected in the employment arrangements contained in the Bill.

The Minister has told the Committee that she is minded to propose an amendment to the definition of the submitting authority, the effect of which would be to define it, in all cases, as the owners and trustees of the school, but with an option to delegate that function to boards of governors if the owners so wish.

The Minister agrees with the views of trade union colleagues that schools should be responsible for determining the professional development needs of their staff and the advice and support services required

to support those needs. At the same time, however, it is important that the ESA has a clear statutory responsibility to ensure that those services are available to schools. That is addressed in clause 13 of the Bill. However, that clause is intentionally flexible in the way in which it has been drafted. It requires the ESA to “provide or secure the provision of” such services. The word “secure” provides for budgets to be delegated to schools, or groups of schools, to provide or procure professional development services themselves. Contrary to a suggestion from one union, the Minister sees little purpose in introducing a charging regime for instances in which the ESA provides such services directly to schools. The Department considers that the administration of a charging system would be a waste of resources.

The Minister does not fully agree with the comments made by trade union colleagues on raising standards, particularly those on clause 34 of the Bill, which outlines the duty of the boards of governors. The Department considers it essential that there are clear responsibilities for raising standards throughout the education system, and the absence of such clarity is recognised as a significant weakness in the current arrangements. It is equally important to ensure that schools co-operate with the ESA in the discharge of its functions. The word “co-operate” was deliberately chosen for the legislation. It is a good description of the sort of relationship that we want, which is one that involves no aggressive challenge, but co-operation, support and challenge where necessary.

The Ulster Teachers Union (UTU) expressed concern that the Bill does not cover early-years learning, nursery schools or special education. That concern illustrates the challenge for any reader in studying such a complex Bill. The Bill must be read alongside the existing legislation, and particular attention must be paid to the amending provisions in the schedules. I am happy to reassure UTU colleagues that their fears are unfounded. The Bill does, in fact, include provisions on early-years services in clause 2(2)(a), although they are not described as such; they are referred to as educational services, which is departmental shorthand.

Equally, nursery schools fall within the definition of primary schools that already exists in the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, and that carries forward to the Education Bill. Schedule 7 to the Education Bill contains extensive amendments to the special educational needs and to the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005. The effect of those amendments is to transfer to the ESA all the functions and duties of education and library boards in relation to special education.

The Minister recognises and agrees with the importance of consultation with, and participation by, trade unions on a range of matters. She will wish to

consider further whether there is a need for specific legislation to underpin that.

I turn now to faith-based education and to the specific definition of a Catholic-maintained school. In its submission, the UTU questioned the need for that definition in the legislation. The Department previously stated that the Minister views the definition as a temporary measure that will be removed from legislation, either in the first Bill, by amendment, or, failing that, in the second Bill.

However, the Department does not fully agree with the comments of union colleagues on faith-based schools or the diversity of school types in the system. Parents and children have the right to choose to attend a Catholic school, or a school of another type, if they so wish. The Department’s aim, through the review of public administration (RPA), is to have a single system of administration to support a diversity of school types. It is not, and has never been, our aim to reduce the diversity of school types within the system.

Finally, I shall address a point made by an important organisation that was not present today. The forum of nursery school teachers expressed concern about the lack of support and training for nursery school principals and staff. I am happy to reassure trade union colleagues that the duties in clause 13 relate to all grant-aided schools, including nursery schools. I shall pause at this point, and we are happy to take questions.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. I wish to follow up on a couple of matters. Given that the Minister is minded to propose an amendment whereby the submitting authority for schools would become the owners, or trustees, of those schools, and given the current arrangements for the controlled sector, in which no body has been established that might own schools within it, is there not a risk that maximised, accountable autonomy will be lost?

Furthermore, when we were discussing the establishment of such a body, concerns were raised that it might be subject to paying VAT. At that time, we were told that we were within days or weeks of receiving a response on that matter from the Treasury. Since then, we have not heard tell of the response, so we do not know the current thinking on the subject. We are concerned that the matter seems to be in abeyance.

**Mr C Stewart:** I am not aware of whether we have had a formal response from the Treasury, but I will certainly take the matter up with Department of Finance colleagues. Our view on the matter is clear. We wish to ensure that there will be a VAT exemption for any statutory authority involved in education, and we will forcibly convey that point to our Treasury colleagues.

With regard to the first part of your question, it is certainly true that the principle of accountable autonomy would be seriously weakened, or damaged,

if we were unable to apply it consistently, and on the basis of equality, to all school types. That is why it is important that we determine where the submitting authority responsibility should lie for controlled schools. In consultation paper 20, we suggested that that responsibility might be assigned to the controlled schools' ownership body. Alternatively, due to that sector's unique nature, it might be more appropriate to place the responsibility directly with boards of governors. We will wish to reflect on that idea and to carefully consider what has been said to us in response to the consultation, which is coming to an end.

**The Chairperson:** In your written submission, you stated that the Minister does not accept that the preparation and operation of employment schemes and, presumably, their ease of management would be a bureaucratic burden. Public bodies that are subject to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 are charged with preparing and submitting equality schemes, in light of model schemes of guidance. The guidance for section 75 duties runs to 153 pages. What assurances can you give boards of governors about the size of the bureaucratic task facing them?

**Mr C Stewart:** The arrangements that we have proposed are sufficiently flexible for a board of governors to decide what priority, and how much effort and resource, it wishes to expend on developing a scheme. We will ensure that a range of model schemes are available for different types of schools, so that, wherever possible, a school will be able to lift a model scheme off the shelf and adopt it as it stands. If that is the case, the burden becomes vanishingly small.

On the other hand, we have heard from a number of stakeholders — and this point was emphasised in last week's evidence session — that some schools and sectors do not regard section 75 obligations as a burden: they regard as absolutely essential to the maintenance of their ethos that they have the opportunity to invest time and resources in designing their employment arrangements.

The proposals in the Bill would allow for that. Therefore, no school will be compelled to expend effort and resources in developing an employment scheme if it does not want to, but the opportunity will be there for those schools that do.

**The Chairperson:** You mentioned a number of models for the different school types. What differences would there be between the models for the different school sectors? As was said earlier, we are trying to get a more unified approach to the employment of staff in our 1,200 schools.

**Mr C Stewart:** The differences may be less than some people fear, and there is strong agreement on that between us and our trade union colleagues. We have made it clear that every employment scheme must comply

with education employment law. We will also expect every employment scheme to reflect best practice on employment matters. Best practice is best practice, so we would not expect to see a significant variation on that between schemes from different schools or different sectors.

There is perhaps scope to tailor schemes a little more precisely on issues of ethos. That remains to be seen, but I do not think that that will form the majority of a scheme's content; it might be a small part of the scheme.

**Mr D Bradley:** Gavin Boyd told the Committee at a previous meeting that the £20 million in savings was over and above the education budget and that it was going directly to front-line services. The situation has changed. I accept the point that the money will now be used to protect front-line services, but it is not added icing on the cake as was suggested to us at the beginning.

**Mr McGrath:** The savings in the current budget period have already been allocated to go back into front-line services. The conversations recently have been about future savings that the ESA will generate. We are simply making the point that we may not always be able to guarantee that those savings will go into front-line services instead of going against savings targets. In the current budget period, some of that £20 million has already been allocated to front-line services.

**Mr D Bradley:** I take your point, but the scenario is different to the one with which we were first presented.

The Committee received a letter from school principals that I quoted from at a previous meeting. At that meeting, I asked you what empirical evidence there is to suggest that the ESA would be successful in raising standards. You answered that the ESA will be based on the model of the CCMS, which was successful, so it logically followed the ESA would be successful.

**Mr McGrath:** I do not think that we made it sound like an automatic process. There is an issue about standards, and we have enough evidence to say that there are issues that we need to tackle. The current structure does not give an even focus across the different sectors.

To again reflect what trade union colleagues have said, the bulk of evidence shows that standards are improved by improving the quality of teaching. That is how the model that we are talking about facilitates an approach to professional development in which schools commission what they want instead of taking what they get. That is how standards will be improved.

The issue is not just about the ESA per se; it is also about the approach to accountable autonomy, a better approach to professional development and an element of challenge when institutions are seen not to

be performing as well as they should be and when the opportunities for kids are not what they should be.

**Mr D Bradley:** OK. You heard the evidence from the representatives of the teachers' unions, and they are clearly not happy with the proposed approach. They think that it is too closely founded on the English approach of constant inspection and placing principals under pressure. Moreover, they believe that the versions of 'Every School a Good School' that have been introduced to date contain, in my words, too much stick and not enough carrot. The Department, the teachers' unions and the inspectorate need to agree on the best possible approach, based — as the union representative said — on a collegiate model, rather than on a model that could cause confrontation.

**Mr McGrath:** I have no difficulty with that suggestion. My colleagues, particularly Katrina Godfrey, will have briefed the Committee on the specifics of the issue of standards and how 'Every School a Good School' will progress. I know that Katrina and her colleagues had considerable discussions with trade unions during the development of 'Every School a Good School'.

When we use words such as help, support and challenge, it is important that the concept of "challenge" is not automatically considered adversarial. If an inspectorate report shows that a school is at the bottom level of performance, no one will dispute that everyone in the system has a duty to address that issue. The challenge for the school and the wider system is how to improve performance. The approach does not necessarily have to be adversarial, but the ongoing level of performance must be challenged with a view to increasing it as much as possible.

The ESA model should help and support all schools and should challenge schools in which performance levels could be better. In the future, some schools might, given their circumstances and resources, be deemed to be performing satisfactorily but could do better. That situation does not necessarily have to be approached in an adversarial way. Challenge should not be interpreted in that way. The approach should determine how to improve children's prospects.

**Mr D Bradley:** I did not interpret it in that way. However, based on the evidence from the teachers' unions, there is potential for disagreement on the approach to raising standards. I am asking you to ensure that there is no disagreement and that all relevant parties are singing from the same hymn sheet. Such an approach will avoid a confrontational situation between the employers and the unions.

**Mr McGrath:** I fully believe that there is a consensus among everyone on the need to raise standards.

**Mr D Bradley:** I agree.

**Mr McGrath:** We are talking about modalities, and I will relay members' points — in particular, Dominic's comments — to the officials who work more closely on the specifics of the standards agenda.

**Mr C Stewart:** I may be able to offer more reassurance to trade union colleagues. In comparing the proposed approaches here with the approach in England and Wales, I draw the Committee's attention — as we have done in the past couple of weeks — to the respective legislation. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 outlines a range of significant intervention powers for local education authorities. Whether or not one thinks that the balance between carrots and sticks in the Education Bill is correct, it contains no new sticks. No new intervention powers are proposed for the ESA.

**Mr McCausland:** Chris said earlier that — except for some references to ethos — schemes of employment will be more or less standard across all sectors. How will ethos feature in schemes of employment?

**Mr C Stewart:** That is difficult to predict without hearing more about how the sectors want ethos to be reflected, but —

**Mr McCausland:** Which sectors have raised that matter to date?

**Mr C Stewart:** The Catholic education sector, the Irish-medium sector and, to a lesser extent, the integrated sector tend to raise that issue most often. The controlled sector's interest is beginning to grow, and it is starting to recognise that it has the freedom to define an ethos for itself. Therefore, it needs to think about what its ethos might be, and how it might be reflected in everything from governance through to employment.

To return to your question, one might expect a scheme of employment — for example, in a Catholic school — to make it clear that, in recruiting and selecting members of staff, part of the appointment procedure would be to test candidates on their knowledge and understanding of the ethos of Catholic education.

**Mr McCausland:** Could you have a situation in which — across all sectors — you delete the word "Catholic" and put in a generic term that would apply to the appropriate sector?

**Mr C Stewart:** It is quite possible that all sectors could start off in different places and eventually find themselves in similar positions. We have made the point to several sectors that we recognise and value their ethos and understand its importance to them. When one considers the strength of ethos in various sectors, they have much in common.

**Mr Lunn:** The Minister said that she was not prepared formally to reserve a proportion of places on the board for trade union representatives because it could give rise to a conflict of interest. How does she

square that with the presence of such representatives on education and library boards?

**Mr McGrath:** The Minister did not establish the education and library boards, so she has no ownership of those governance arrangements. They predate her appointment. They are very large bodies, and bodies with that size of membership are few and far between in governance terms. Whereas in the past, it was possible to accommodate a representative model with 30 members or more, it is now difficult to accommodate that within the numbers discussed for the ESA and other public bodies.

**Mr C Stewart:** My understanding of the legislation is that positions are not reserved for trade union representatives. There is a difference between a system that is open and allows people to take part and a system or set of arrangements that reserves places for particular organisations or stakeholders. The issue of conflict of interest is important. If I were a teacher, I would look to the trade union to represent my interests and not to sit on the management side of the table.

**Mr Lunn:** If the trade unions want input at the top layer of the ESA, surely the conflict of interest issue could be dealt with. Such representation is made on lots of boards and organisations, and sometimes members simply have to exclude themselves from certain discussions. Conflict of interest should not preclude the trade unions from having proper input for most of the ESA's business. The issue is probably academic anyway, because if the Minister sticks to a 12-person maximum for the board, seven of the members will be councillors.

**Mr C Stewart:** The conflict of interest issue in that case would be extremely difficult. I can think of few aspects of the ESA's business or affairs that would not touch on employment matters. Your first point is important. It is vital that there is an ongoing, effective working relationship between the ESA and trade union colleagues. Their input to the ESA's business is extremely important. We would expect the ESA to pursue a social-partnership approach. We expect a productive, mature relationship between the ESA and trade union colleagues, with challenge where it is appropriate without confrontation.

**Mr Lunn:** Michelle has kindly lent me her copy of the Department's response. I wish that I had it in front of me earlier. I have not seen it until now. That is another example of a last-minute production from the Department. I have not received that paper yet.

**The Chairperson:** They were given out yesterday when they were received, is that right?

**The Committee Clerk:** Yes, by e-mail, and hard copies were distributed.

**Mr Lunn:** Some of us get up and come straight here and do not see our e-mails. It certainly has not come to me as a hard copy. That is a normal complaint; everything arrives at the last minute.

**The Chairperson:** That was a rebuttal for the Department, and I hope that you will take that on board again.

**Mr McGrath:** Right on the chin, Chairperson.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Can you assure the unions that, under clause 10 as it stands, the ESA can employ a panel of teachers?

**Mr C Stewart:** Yes, it could. The clause is sufficiently flexible and broad for the ESA to employ a panel of teachers in exactly the way that trade union colleagues have described. Whether they ought to and whether that represents the best use of resources is an issue that the Department and the ESA might want to consider, but the legislation does allow for it.

**Mr Poots:** The UTU raised issues about the absence of focus on special needs and early-years provision. Will you respond to that?

**Mr C Stewart:** Early years is covered in the legislation. We do not use the phrase "early years", because it is not a form of words that could easily be incorporated into legislation. The phrase we use is "educational services". The definition in the Bill is somewhat dry and wordy, but it is there specifically because there was a need, for the first time, to put the delivery of early-years services on a proper legislative footing. It is something that we have been doing on an extra-statutory basis up until now. However, we identified the need to put it on a proper legislative basis, and it is there.

**Mr Poots:** Are you satisfied that it deals with nursery provision and so forth?

**Mr C Stewart:** Nursery schools fall within the definition of primary schools. The definition of primary schools is in previous legislation, and will continue in the Education Bill.

**Mr Poots:** What about the private playgroups?

**Mr C Stewart:** Those would come within early years.

**Mr Poots:** They do not fall within primary schools?

**Mr C Stewart:** No.

**The Chairperson:** Is there any other aspect that falls under the definition of educational services other than early years? Is it all-encompassing? That is always the problem; if it is not specific, those who read it may miss that. However, if there is then a challenge, the Department is able to say that it is covered because they know that that aspect is included, but you are the only guardians of that knowledge.

**Mr C Stewart:** Perhaps I should explain the process of how we got there. The drafting of that particular clause was long and difficult. Members will be aware that responsibility for a range of early-years services was transferred from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to the Department of Education some years ago. There was a clear need to do that, and we moved quickly to do so. The agreement was that we would put that on a sound legislative basis at the earliest possible opportunity.

Perhaps naively, we thought that that would be a simple task, and that we would come up with a simple, clear definition of early-years services, which could be written into the Bill. When we looked more closely at what services are actually provided, they were extremely broad and diverse.

The strength of that definition lies in the fact that those primarily non-statutory providers are continually coming up with new and good ideas of the types of services that ought to be delivered in and around communities. In order to accommodate that, we needed a very broad, flexible and all-encompassing definition, and one that we hope is sufficiently open to allow for the future development of services that are not currently delivered or perhaps not even currently envisaged. That is why it is written in that very broad formulation. Had we not done so, the difficulty would be that every time someone comes up with a new and good idea in early-years services, we would have to go back to primary legislation and stretch the definition yet again in order to encompass those ideas. That is why we have taken that particular approach. I cannot tell you exactly what might fall within that definition at this stage, because we have deliberately left it very open.

**Mr Poots:** I remain to be convinced on that point. I feel that private playgroups will probably get a raw deal. They do not receive the same funding or support as others, and their being put into a large silo with others may not be in their long-term interests.

I do not believe that the Minister's notion of having 12 board members — a majority of which would be councillors — will work. That will result in there being a maximum of five educationalists on that board, and the ESA board requires a greater capacity. Furthermore, if the Department is going to go down the route of having subgroups and bringing in others from outside, it would be much better appointing a larger board and drawing the subgroups and the expertise from that board rather than externally.

**Mr C Stewart:** That is a fair point. However, I emphasise that the Minister has not yet given her final answer on the size or composition of the board. She has not yet had an opportunity to come to a conclusion on the points that Committee members have raised,

and she wants to do that before she indicates her formal position to the Committee.

**The Chairperson:** Clause 13 has the heading:

“ESA to provide or secure provision of training and advisory and support services for schools”.

Clause 13(1) states that:

“It is the duty of ESA to provide or secure the provision of —

(a) such training, and

(b) such advisory and support services”.

A concern was raised by the unions that there is already a wealth of expertise within the education and library boards as they are currently constituted. Why is it that the ESA — in its interim and current forms — will be going outside the boards to secure and provide other services? Why is the ESA not seeking to use and utilise the excellent provision and services that already exist?

**Mr McGrath:** I do not believe that the Bill is implying that. Chris's point was that the legislation is framed so that the ESA does not necessarily have to be the direct provider, thus allowing flexibility in the future.

There is considerable resource in the curriculum work that is carried out by the Regional Training Unit (RTU), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and Curriculum Advisors and Support Services (CASS) which needs to be brought together, thus harnessing those skills and expertise. The thinking behind that provision was to create a model that was much more responsive to what schools want or need. If that model is not in the form or shape of what schools want, the Department is rightly trying to make provision for the ESA to have the duty and the flexibility to create what schools, school principals and boards of governors need for professional development.

There is a sense among many of the schools at the moment that a table d'hôte rather than an à la carte approach is being taken in relation to what is available for professional development. We said earlier that we see much more scope for schools telling us what they need and how they need it, and the ESA will then have the flexibility to respond to those requests. It will, undoubtedly, use much of the existing expertise and skills.

The delivery model will be a much more of a responsive commissioning model by schools than a delivery model that emanates from the system. That is the theme, and it reflects many of the messages that the Department has picked up from schools. Those messages have also been reflected through some of the evidence that was given by our trade union colleagues.

**Mr C Stewart:** That is exactly right. The point that the Department hears most frequently from stakeholders about CASS is that there are excellent people in that organisation who provide very good services, but that it is too inflexible and not sufficiently tailored to what

the schools and staff within those schools determine their needs to be. Indeed, we heard those sentiments expressed again from trade union colleagues today.

That is the reason for trying to introduce the flexibility; it is not that we see wholesale privatisation of provision. We see change through moving away from the ESA providing services and towards schools or groups of schools providing the services themselves. There are already seen some very good examples of groups of schools — particularly within learning communities — coming together, assessing their own professional development needs, carving out some resources and procuring or delivering those services in, and for, the schools. We believe that that model has a great deal of potential. We will tell the ESA that we expect it to look sympathetically and favourably on proposals from schools or groups of schools to develop professional-development approaches for themselves.

**Mr Lunn:** The UTU made the point about the ESA's duty to have regard to the requirements of industry, commerce and the professions. The union also believes that ESA should also have regard to its requirements. I assume that what the union means by that is that it is a necessary and important part of industry, commerce and the professions, and it wants its views to be considered as well. I am not sure whether it is the Minister's response when the Department says that it is not clear about what the union means. I believe that what it means is reasonably clear. Is that simply Minister-speak for "no way"?

**Mr C Stewart:** No, I do not believe so. Your explanation of it is helpful. Exactly what the union meant was not clear in its paper. It said that we need to amend the legislation to reflect unions' needs. I was not quite sure what that meant. If it means that the clause ought to be interpreted as meaning that the teaching profession is an important one, and that its needs ought to be fairly central to the application of that clause, we fully support that. However, it was not clear from the wording in the paper exactly what it meant by having regard for trade unions' needs.

**Mr Lunn:** Is it becoming clearer now?

**Mr C Stewart:** If trade-union colleagues agree with your helpful explanation, then I believe that it is.

**Mr Lunn:** If trade-union colleagues were to write to you again to clarify that point, you could take it further.

**Mr C Stewart:** That would be extremely helpful.

**Mr Lunn:** In the meantime, however, it is not ruled out. You have said simply that it is not clear what the union meant.

**Mr C Stewart:** That is correct.

**The Chairperson:** On that point, I want to say, particularly to the trade-union delegation, that it will

have a right to reply and respond to the Department's paper, a copy of which we have given them. Therefore, if there are issues on which it still has concerns, we want to ensure — as we have done with others — that we try to address them. I am sure, Chris, that you are quite happy with that.

**Mr C Stewart:** Absolutely, Chairman. Our door is never closed.

**The Chairperson:** It takes a long time to open, but it is never closed. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister has now indicated that she is minded to propose an amendment to the definition of a submitting authority. An issue surrounds the submitting authority's being the trustees — people who own schools. Following from comments that were made last week, for example, by Bishop Walsh, given the fact that trustees currently appoint four members of a school's board of governors, is it not, therefore, sufficient for the people who are on a school's board of governors to be able to safeguard and guarantee the ethos of that school?

**Mr C Stewart:** The Minister's policy is that it is not sufficient and that arrangements ought to allow the owners or trustees of schools, not only to make appointments to boards of governors, but to set the governance and employment arrangements within which those governors will operate, or, at least, to ensure that ethos is properly reflected in those arrangements.

**The Chairperson:** OK. We will now move on to your response to the issues that were raised by the CCMS and the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education. Have you provided a paper for that?

**Mr McGrath:** We provided a response last week that we did not get a chance to discuss.

**The Chairperson:** Of course, you did provide that paper. I apologise.

**Mr McGrath:** Chris will elaborate on some of the detail of the paper that we provided. Having listened to the comments that were made by the commission and the CCMS, we were struck by the similarity between a number of their key points and the Minister's proposals.

Strong emphasis was put on the need for a single education system, albeit one that reflects and recognises diversity. The Cardinal made specific points about the need for equality in education policy and provision. Support was expressed for shrinkage of administration and a focus on front line delivery. Bishop McKeown talked of the need to emphasise delegation to schools and the need for accountable autonomy.

Discussion took place around establishing the appropriate balance between the role of the school and the wider role of the ESA as the single employing

authority. As was evidenced earlier today, the role of the CCMS as the employing authority for teachers in Catholic-maintained schools has worked, and it is difficult to see how, with goodwill, the broader model proposed cannot or will not work in the future.

The need for a flexible approach was recognised. Bishop Walsh cited the example that such an approach could deal with the problems of small schools that might well want to have a lot provided from the centre.

As the NICCE, in particular, recognised, the Department has been engaged in a continuous process of dialogue with the Church, the trustees, the commission and all stakeholders in the legislation.

The written and oral evidence shows that there is a perceived lack of clarity around some aspects of the single employing authority, and that has given rise to specific concerns on behalf of the NICCE, in particular. We would say that based on the single employing authority model that has been operating to date, namely the CCMS, those concerns can be laid to rest. The Minister is committed to continuing dialogue with the NICCE with a view to providing as much clarity as possible and, through that, to allay the concerns expressed by the commission and the CCMS last week.

**Mr C Stewart:** Before I move on to the detail, I shall pick up on couple of the general points that John made. It is worth reminding ourselves that the RPA is the biggest reform of education in a generation. Therefore, it is not surprising that, from time to time, concerns and fears have arisen among a number of stakeholders. The Committee heard a number of those last week, and some more again today from trade union colleagues. As John said, throughout that process, we have and will continue to seek to address those concerns and to accommodate the views of stakeholders wherever we can. That is part of an open and transparent process.

We recognise and value the diversity of the education system and of the various sectors and school types, each of which has a distinctive character and ethos. We recognise that every sector contributes to the success of our education system and that every sector faces the same challenges of raising standards.

Every sector has a part to play in meeting the needs of children and young people. The RPA is based on that recognition. Our aim is for a modern, fit-for-purpose, value-for-money system of administration. We aim for a single system, but one supports a diversity of school types and offers the same opportunities to all on the basis of equality. We believe that the provisions in the Bill meet that aim. They threaten no school and no sector, but they offer an opportunity and a challenge to all to work in partnership for continued and greater success.

The paper that we provided to the Committee seeks to comprehensively address all of the issues raised by the NICCE and the CCMS. I will not attempt to cover all of those now, but I will concentrate on the key themes of the commission's evidence. We will, of course, be happy to pick up any other points during questions.

The commission's evidence posed three key questions or tests about the Education Bill. It asked about the rights of parents, the provision of the trustees to exercise their rights and duties, and the structures of support for each education sector.

On the first of those, the commission emphasised the importance that it places on the rights of parents to have their children educated in a manner that is consistent with their religious and philosophical convictions. The Minister acknowledges that right and the need to ensure that it continues to be reflected in legislation. Again, the existing legislation must be looked at, as well as the Education Bill. Article 44 of the 1986 Order includes a provision on having regard to the principle:

“pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.”

The duty in that provision will apply both to the ESA and to the Department, and it will cover the exercising by the ESA of all of the powers and duties conferred, or imposed, on it by education legislation. Therefore, the Minister's view is that the Education Bill does preserve the rights of parents, and fully addresses the Commission's concerns.

The second matter was the provision for trustees to exercise their rights and duties. A number of measures have been included in policy and legislation to ensure that the role of trustees to foster and develop the ethos of Catholic education is recognised, supported and, where appropriate, provided for in legislation. Specifically, there will be no change to the ownership of Catholic schools.

The role of trustees will be underpinned in the legislation, and the submitting authorities will control the schemes of management and employment for Catholic schools and have consultation rights on matters that affect those schools, ranging from planning to the appointment of governors.

Boards of governors will make key employment decisions, under the control and direction of the trustees and exercised through the schemes of employment. The ESA will be bound by the schemes of employment, and it will be under a legal duty to put into effect the lawful decisions of boards of governors. In addition, there will be no change to lawful criteria centred on ethos, such as the requirement for a certificate in religious education.

Nothing in the Bill impedes the desire for greater coherence within the Catholic sector and, indeed, some provisions will assist it, such as bringing the administration arrangements for Catholic-grammar and Catholic-maintained schools closer together. Trustees will continue to have modest public funding for professional support for the discharge of their roles.

In its evidence, the Commission referred to two matters under the heading: the connection between employment and ethos and exemptions from equality legislation. With respect to employment, the Commission suggested that individual boards of governors, rather than the ESA, should be the formal employers of staff. As John McGrath said, we do not fully understand why the Commission feels that only individual school employers can safeguard the ethos of Catholic schools. That strikes us as somewhat strange for three reasons.

First, the fracturing of employment arrangements that that would involve seems to be at odds with the Commission's declared aim of drawing Catholic schools closer together into a more coherent sector, particularly when, as at present, the vast majority of Catholic schools are already part of collective employment arrangements. Members will know that teachers in Catholic-maintained schools are employed by the CCMS and non-teaching staff are employed by the education and library boards. The RPA employment-model arrangements are, essentially, the CCMS model applied to all sectors, so we wonder why the commission is now arguing against those arrangements, which both it and the CCMS say are working well.

Reiterating what John McGrath said, the commission said in its evidence to the Committee that small schools might struggle to discharge employment functions without a supporting authority being in place. The commission and the CCMS also acknowledged that the CCMS has an intervention role, albeit with a light touch, but one that it exercises from time to time.

Secondly, irrespective of whether individual schools or the ESA employ staff, there would be no significant change to the responsibilities to be discharged by boards of governors, or to the requirement that all parties must act within education and employment law.

Thirdly, the proposal from the commission strikes us as unnecessary, because, under RPA arrangements, only boards of governors, and not the ESA, can decide who will be appointed to the staff of any Catholic school — a point that was reiterated by trade union colleagues. Boards of governors must comply with schemes of management and employment that will be set by the trustees.

The secondary issue raised under the heading was that of exemptions from equality legislation. In its written evidence, the commission suggested that religious

schools should be exempt from the requirements of equality legislation. Members will be aware of the background to this matter, and they will know that, at the moment, the education system here is not covered by the full range of equality legislation. Schools are not public authorities for the purposes of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and the recruitment of teachers is outside the scope of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order.

Against that background, we would wish to comment on two aspects. First, the commission's paper does not make a clear case for change, and we do not know what problem or difficulty the commission was seeking to address or which aspects of anti-discrimination or fair-employment legislation it felt ought to have been set aside.

Secondly, with respect to the feasibility of the proposal, legal advice is required to determine whether the Assembly could take forward legislation such as that suggested by the commission. However, it is questionable whether such measures would be within the Assembly's legislative competence as defined by section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

We welcome the apparent change in the commission's position, which it outlined in its oral evidence. The commission stated that no further exemptions were sought, and we welcome that because we believe that there is no case for such exemptions to be sought.

The Minister considers that the Education Bill recognises the rights and duties of trustees and makes effective provision for trustees to exercise those rights and duties. The Minister remains of the view that the employment arrangements contained in the Bill are the best option. Those arrangements will deliver significant benefits in relation to raising standards, professional development, workforce planning, consistency and equality and value for money. The arrangements also provide an autonomous role for boards of governors on an equitable basis across all sectors and effective ethos safeguards for owners and trustees.

The third point concerns the structures of support for each education sector. Members will know that the Department is considering a number of education sectors' business cases for public funding for sectoral support. Each business case will be assessed for value for money and against the policy criteria that are set out in policy paper 21, which the Committee considered previously. The commission suggested that the Education Bill should include references to the role of various sectoral organisations. However, the approach in paper 21 makes it clear that sectoral organisations will be non-statutory bodies and will not have any statutory functions. Therefore, we find it

difficult to see a clear or appropriate rationale for making reference to sectoral organisations in legislation.

The Minister also points out that legislation will contain sufficient duties, or other mechanisms, to ensure that there is effective consultation with education sectors. The education advisory forum will provide a formal statutory mechanism for the involvement of sectors and other stakeholders in policy formulation. That will be complemented by the existing specific duties to consult the trustees and others on a range of legislative matters and not just on development proposals for schools.

In respect of the operational functions of the ESA on matters such as raising standards, the Minister considers that any formal duties to consult should refer to boards of governors and/or the owners or trustees of schools, rather than to sectoral bodies. The trustees may, of course, request a sectoral body to provide them with advice and support in relation to such consultations.

The Minister considers that effective arrangements are being made for the support structures of each education sector. However, in keeping with the policy that is set out in paper 21, the Minister does not see a need for any new legislative provisions in relation to that matter. The commission set three key tests, or success criteria, for the Education Bill, and it is the Minister's view that the Bill meets all three of those criteria for all sectors.

**The Chairperson:** If that is the case, and the Minister feels that the Bill meets all three criteria and is sufficient for all sectors, is there not an anomaly or inequality? Perhaps you will explain the historical issue of why our schools are not all covered by the provisions of equality legislation. Nevertheless, if we go down this road, a non-departmental public body will be established for the controlled sector, to own its schools, and that body will be subject to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However, there will be another body, under the ownership of the trustees or the Catholic schools, which will not be a non-departmental public body and will not be subject to section 75. That is a glaring inequality, because you are not treating sectors equitably.

The two main words that came out of last week's meeting with the CCMS and the commission were trust and clarity. There is a lack of trust on the part of both the CCMS and the commission, and there is a lack of clarity among most people. How do we reach the situation in which people have clarity and equity?

It will not be acceptable to have one sector that will be subject to all the equality scrutiny that is usually applied to a public body when other sectors are not.

**Mr C Stewart:** There are a number of reasons why the existing range of equality legislation is not fully

applied. A large part of the thinking concerning section 75 was the need to minimise or avoid additional bureaucratic burdens on schools. In the context of collective employment arrangements, the CCMS and the education and library boards would be subject to section 75. Therefore, there is no particular advantage in applying it a second time to individual schools.

The issue around the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 is one of ethos. At the time of the Order's inception, the Churches felt that there was a need to exclude teachers from its provisions to ensure that measures to protect an ethos could continue to be legitimately applied. The strongest views on that were expressed by the Protestant Churches, who felt that if the exemption were not granted, there was a danger of de facto inequality for Protestant teachers who would not enjoy the same range of employment opportunities as their Catholic counterparts.

I understand your point about equity or equality between the ownership arrangements for Catholic schools and controlled schools. However, finding an answer that you would regard as satisfactory is difficult. Catholic schools are owned by the Catholic Church; an attempt to apply legislation that governs public authorities to a Church would be difficult. However, controlled schools will remain in the public sector and will be owned by some form of public authority — it would be an unusual and difficult approach not to apply the normal panoply of legislation to any public authority. Essentially, the difference is between public ownership and private ownership — between a public authority and a Church. Any attempt to subject both to exactly the same approach in legislation would be fraught with difficulty.

Committee members and a number of stakeholders have emphasised the issue of clarity on a number of occasions, and we accept that. Our approach has been based on seeking to avoid excessive detail or excessive bureaucracy in legislation. We accept that that has given rise to concern about a lack of clarity. A potential approach is to move into legislation — probably subordinate legislation — a lot of the detail that we proposed to place in guidance, and that is something that the Minister will want to consider.

**Mr Poots:** What will be the situation for voluntary grammar schools, which are currently owned by trustees?

**Mr C Stewart:** There are no plans to change the ownership of those schools.

**The Chairperson:** If boards of governors of Catholic schools decline to employ candidates for vacancies on the grounds of ethos, where is the reassurance for Catholic trustees that the ESA will fight such cases with the same commitment as the CCMS? I am talking about cases where there is a good and arguable case that the board of governors' decision was lawful.

**Mr C Stewart:** If the decision of a board of governors has been lawful and it has applied the correct procedures, we would expect the ESA to provide exactly the same backing and support as the CCMS currently does. The issue is that the law applies equally to all employers, both current and future, in the education sector. The suggestion that is made from time to time that the CCMS, or an individual school employer, has more leeway or opportunity to act differently should be challenged, because it is not accurate. The issue from our perspective, and from the perspective of the ESA in due course, is whether the law has been correctly applied; the school will be supported if it has, but the decision made by the board of governors would not be taken forward if it has not.

**The Chairperson:** You could argue that those boards are able to do that because of the exemptions that exist. Therefore, the situation is not equitable.

**Mr C Stewart:** The effect of the exemption is there, whether or not one agrees with it. It applies equally to every employer, current and future. It does not and cannot apply differentially between CCMS and the ESA or, between an individual school as an employer or a collective employer.

**Mr McCausland:** I am interested in the appointment of governors and boards of governors. It is a big issue with the Catholic Church.

I noticed in a newspaper recently that the Department was advertising for people to apply to register to serve on boards of governors. It was interesting that, on the form, the applicant could tick which box he or she wished to apply for: there was no provision for expression of preference. The categories were: “integrated”, “Irish-medium”, “Catholic management” and “other management”. I thought it interesting that some sectors were specifically titled, while others were not. That could be extremely confusing for some people. I will return to that point.

I am interested in the current composition of boards of governors and how, in practice, that works out. I understand the composition of boards of governors of controlled schools, but if you asked me about the composition of boards of governors in other sectors, I would have some difficulty describing it. Yesterday, I asked that question of officials at an education and library board: they had to go away and check the answer. Things tend to work in silos.

Does the Department appoint some of the governors to Catholic schools, and, if so, how many does it appoint?

**Mr C Stewart:** I find myself in the same position as the hapless official at the education and library board: I will have to run away to check. The sums are extremely complicated. Some of my colleagues may be able to advise me.

**Mr McCausland:** It would be useful if you were to make up a little grid: I am sure that you could do it when you return to the office this afternoon. I started to make one yesterday, but I could not get all the answers. Your grid should list all the school categories, separating, for example, controlled primary from controlled integrated primary. Presumably, there are transfers from a controlled primary but not from a controlled integrated primary.

**Mr C Stewart:** I would need to check that detail. We could certainly provide that.

**Mr McCausland:** In the grid, all the school categories should be listed on one side, and all the different sources from which school governors are drawn should be listed on the other. Then we would know the current situation. It seemed to me yesterday, and your evidence this morning shows, that a lot of this discussion takes place in a general atmosphere of confusion and lack of clarity. That would be a useful exercise.

How are the department-appointed governors for a Catholic school selected? Applicants fill in the form, asking that their names go forward. For example, I — or Mervyn, or someone else — decides to put his name forward to Michelle to be a governor of a school of a particular category.

**Mr C Stewart:** We would be happy to take your application.

**Mr McCausland:** I know that you would. *[Laughter]*. Suppose that the Church is reasonably satisfied with the arrangements and is content that the people coming forward are in full accord with the Catholic ethos. How does that work in the Department? How do you check that?

**Mr C Stewart:** We check it through consultation. There is a legal requirement to consult.

**Mr McCausland:** Who do you consult?

**Mr C Stewart:** In the case of a Catholic grammar school, we consult the trustees or the existing board of governors. In the case of a Catholic-maintained school, the education and library board would carry out the consultation with the CCMS.

**Mr McCausland:** Is the CCMS, or the particular order that owns the school, able to look down the list and determine who fits the criteria? How do they check that the candidate fits in with the Catholic ethos? How does it work? It is one of the mysteries of the universe.

**Mr C Stewart:** It is; it is a mystery to me. You would have to ask them how they satisfy themselves about that.

In practice, I am unsure whether there is the same need to check that in detail. In proposing the appointments, our colleagues in the Department and in

the education and library boards take careful note of the preferences expressed by applicants on their forms. We try to, where possible, match applicants with the type of school or, in many cases, the particular school to which they want to be appointed. Applicants tend to self-select. They apply for a particular school or type of school because they have an interest in and an understanding of the ethos of that type of school.

**Mr McCausland:** However, the application form does not contain the word “controlled” even though you are appointing governors for the next four years.

**Mr C Stewart:** That is a symptom of a situation that arises in several aspects of education. We tend to use management-type or administrative arrangements as a proxy for ethos. It is not a particularly exact or helpful proxy.

**Mr McCausland:** My perception — which I think is widespread — is that certain sectors are looked after whereas the others must take what they get. That is how most people perceive the situation, given that names of particular sectors are not included on forms. What happens if I want to apply to controlled primary school but I do not want to apply to a controlled-integrated primary school? I suppose that I could select “integrated schools” on the form. The word “controlled” does not appear on the form — that is incredible.

**Mr C Stewart:** Every applicant can indicate — in any degree of detail — for which sectors they want to be considered.

**Mr McCausland:** With respect, Chris, you cannot argue this point away. Controlled schools seem to be an afterthought with the Department at a stage when it is appointing governors for four years and after much debate about the ESA and the sector. If the Department cannot even manage to include the word “controlled” on the advertisement, what confidence could anybody have in the impartiality and inclusiveness of the Department’s approach? That is the problem.

**Mr C Stewart:** I find myself in complete agreement with you. The form could be improved considerably by including specific references to school types and the ethos of schools rather than to their management type.

**Mr McCausland:** Therefore, I am sure that if I visit the website tomorrow the form will have been changed.

**Mr McGrath:** Chris has recognised — as I do — the merit of your points, which we will consider after the meeting. As was mentioned earlier, we need to do a much better job on the business of recruiting governors by explaining the role and by offering induction and training. Some of our materials are, perhaps, past their sell-by date.

**Mr McCausland:** I was told that the deadline for applications is 20 May 2009. There is also an issue about how education and library boards appoint

governors. The newspaper contains an advert for departmental appointees. Will there be an advert for governors that are appointed by education and library boards? Are they required to advertise? I was told yesterday that the answer is probably not. How those governors emerge seems to be another mystery of the universe.

The Department will appoint those governors for four years, and, therefore, they will serve during three years of the ESA. They will, potentially, have a larger role in the future. It is clear that, in certain sectors, the ethos of governors fits in with the ethos of the school. However, once again, the controlled sector is at a serious disadvantage, even though it accommodates almost half of the children. Could we have the grid in the next day or so?

**Mr McGrath:** I am reliably informed that such a grid exists in the Department. We can obtain that for the Committee as soon as possible.

**Mr McCausland:** Will you e-mail it to members?

**Mr McGrath:** We should be able to.

**Mr McCausland:** That is excellent. Will you also explain how the system works in the Catholic sector? That will enable us to see how it might potentially work for the controlled sector in the future.

**Mr C Stewart:** Certainly; I can talk to colleagues who administer that process and elicit a detailed description.

**Mr McGrath:** We can maybe bring a paper back to the Committee, because we are looking at how we are going to modernise our whole approach to that, so we need to set it in that context.

**Mr C Stewart:** You rightly pointed out a number of deficiencies in the current arrangements. In doing so, you are making a good case for us to move as quickly as possible to establishing the ESA and to having new and revised arrangements to address the very issues that you raised.

**Mr McCausland:** Your logic was going well and then it went slightly astray, but we will allow for that. I want you to move to a new system of equality. It is about getting that correction, and I welcome that. Getting that information will help us in that direction.

**The Chairperson:** Would it not be preferable to move to the system in the Bill, rather than to the system with the ESA? Then you would have the trust that we spoke about earlier. It is clear that other sectors have issues. Nelson articulated the issues from the point of view of the controlled sector — there is no trust there.

**Mr C Stewart:** Many sectors have issues with governance, and the point that you made at the beginning was absolutely correct. The current arrangements are

Byzantine. There are weird and wonderful arrangements of compositions of boards of governors, and separate administrative arrangements and different management types for schools have developed over the years. However, the central thrust of the RPA proposals is that that is unnecessary. It adds no value; in fact, it detracts value from the education system. Therefore, we need to move as quickly and as far as we can towards harmonising those arrangements.

You made a particular point, which is symptomatic of the situation — instead of responding to and addressing issues of ethos properly, we use management type as a very imperfect proxy. We need to move away from that. Ethos has a role to play, and it needs to be recognised and handled properly on an equitable and consistent basis across all sectors.

**Mr D Bradley:** You answered the point that was made by the commission, which suggested that boards of governors should be the formal employers of staff rather than the ESA. However, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that that arrangement will change in the future. It may turn out that boards of governors, not only in Catholic maintained schools, but in other schools, will become the employers. If that were to happen, how would you protect teachers from the current situation, which the unions described earlier, that is, lack of clarity; pension difficulties; lack of transparency; lower standards; discrimination against women; and so on? If boards of governors were to become the employers, would the Department be in a position to ensure that that situation would not exist in the future?

**Mr McGrath:** The Minister is supporting the model of a single employing authority to tackle, *inter alia*, the sort of issues that trade union colleagues flagged up and that you have repeated. If we were to conjecture that we lived in a world in which there was no single employing authority, the issue of how we would stop those matters arising would be down to political decisions and legislation, and to moving from the situation that we are trying to put in place to change it.

**Mr D Bradley:** Yes, but it is not beyond the realms of possibility.

**Mr McGrath:** That issue would be addressed when those changes were being made.

**Mr D Bradley:** That is what I am asking. Would you be able to address those issues in the future?

**Mr McGrath:** I do not know. On the basis of the direction that we were given on the issue, the single employing authority is rightly seen as a method of tackling and eradicating existing deficiencies. If someone wanted to replace the single employing authority, it would be a challenge to demonstrate that those deficiencies did not return to a greater or lesser extent.

**Mr D Bradley:** It would be down to boards of governors then.

**Mr McGrath:** No. It would be down to the person who might be sitting at this table at a future date articulating the case for a change in legislation that their Minister of the day wished to implement.

**Mr C Stewart:** That is entirely right. It would be extremely difficult under those arrangements. The Department could not abandon its responsibilities, but it would be extremely difficult for the Department or the ESA to address the range of risks and difficulties that you listed.

One of the things that was said in an evidence session last week — and it was stated previously by the GBA — was that we ought to be in a position whereby individual boards of governors are the determinants of what is lawful and what is not.

If the Assembly decided to do that, the difficulty would be that 1,251 schools potentially represent 1,251 approaches as to what is correct, lawful and best practice in the publicly-funded education system. In those circumstances, it would be extremely difficult to ensure the sort of consistency or equality that I think lies behind your question.

**Mr Lunn:** On the issue of the consultation on the appointment of community governors, and the commission's request that "consult" should be changed to "in consultation with", I see that the Department regards that wording as too imprecise. Is that based on legal advice?

**Mr C Stewart:** Yes, it is.

**Mr Lunn:** There is no onus on the Department to make a suggestion for a change to something that it agrees with, but how would the Department have responded if the commission had asked for a change to "having consulted with", or to leave it as "in consultation with", but with the caveat that the ESA has the ultimate decision? I believe that I am right in saying that that is in the Bill anyway — the phrase "community governors chosen by ESA" is repeated about 10 times, and "amendments to the scheme" is also mentioned. Therefore, that is pretty clear. What is the problem about using the phrase "in consultation with"?

**Mr C Stewart:** The Department considers the proposal to be very clear. What is not clear is what the commission is telling us is broken. Before we try to fix it, we must know what is broken.

The commission said to the Department and stated in its evidence to the Committee last week that the current arrangements are working very satisfactorily from its point of view. Those current arrangements are clear. We know exactly — in legal terms — what "consult" and "appoint" mean. The difficulty is that the Legislative Counsel states that he does not know what

“in consultation” might mean. It sounded to him, as it did to me, like joint appointment. The difficulty with joint appointment arises when the two participants fail to agree.

**Mr Lunn:** I did not get that impression from the evidence last week, but I suppose that I can look at the wording again.

**Mr McGrath:** In the evidence session last week, Bishop Walsh in particular made the point that they were happy with the existing arrangements. He seemed to have a view that the form of wording that the commission was offering would somehow imply a guarantee that there would be deeper and more meaningful consultation than the form of wording that the Department was suggesting. In a sense, it is neutral — the spirit of the consultation is separate from its precise legal nicety.

The Department is saying that the legislative draftsman sees a probable diminution — rather than added value — in using the words “in consultation with”. Ultimately, the appointments will be made by the ESA, and diluting that will cause confusion.

**Mr C Stewart:** That formulation carries considerable risk. We must avoid making bad law, and law that is not clear is bad law. We know what “consult” means. There is a body of case law that sets the parameters very clearly.

We know what a “reasonable requirement” is for the ESA or any public authority — what it must do, and how it needs to conduct meaningful consultation. However the phrase “in consultation with” would be new territory. Its meaning would be unclear; therefore, carries a significant risk of making bad law — law that is not clear and that would have to be interpreted by the courts, probably after a dispute.

**Mr Lunn:** If they come back to the Department with the suggestion of using the phrase “having consulted with”, would your legal expert consider that?

**Mr C Stewart:** We would certainly seek advice on that. With my usual caveat that I am not a lawyer, I cannot see any difference between “having consulted with” and the form of words in the Bill.

**Mr Lunn:** I am not a lawyer either, but I fancy that I can see a difference; “having consulted with” is much closer to “consult” than “in consultation with”.

**Mr C Stewart:** Sorry, that is what I meant. I do not see any difference between “having consulted with” and “consult”.

**Mr Lunn:** If there is no difference, why not placate them? I will have them put that to the Department to see what happens.

**The Chairperson:** You made a comment that law that is not clear is bad law. The Committee has heard

from a number of people who said that there was no clarity in the Bill; therefore, it must be bad law. Furthermore, you have also said that the Department is going to make changes and propose amendments.

**Mr McGrath:** Sometimes law is changed to change the proposed content and purpose of it. On other occasions, it is changed — and rightly so — because it is not clear or because the provisions do not deal with the purpose behind the law, which can easily happen. However, as Chris said, if something on the statute book is confusing and misleading, it is bad law.

**Mr C Stewart:** Certainly, law that is not clear is bad law. However, law that stakeholders disagree with is not necessarily bad law.

**Miss McIlveen:** Did the Department carry out or commission any research into ethos and the protection of ethos in legislation? Furthermore, did the Department examine how that has been carried out in other jurisdictions of the UK and elsewhere?

**Mr C Stewart:** The Department examined legislation in other jurisdictions. It has not carried out anything that I would describe as research.

**Miss McIlveen:** Is it possible for research to be carried out in that area, perhaps by examining the Scottish or some European models?

**Mr C Stewart:** Do you mean how ethos is dealt with?

**Miss McIlveen:** Yes. I do not necessarily mean how it is dealt with in relation to the Catholic Church, although it does fit quite well into the discussion. The issue of ethos exists in and around the controlled sector also.

**The Chairperson:** An issue was raised about what happened in Scotland in 1926 when Catholic schools went into public ownership. Was the ethos of those schools protected?

**Miss McIlveen:** The ethos of those schools was protected with legal provisions. I was wondering whether the Department carried out any comprehensive work in relation to that, which is obviously a key theme in all this.

**Mr C Stewart:** No work has been carried out on that. As I said, the Department has examined the legislation in various jurisdictions and the various suggestions that were made by stakeholders. The Department’s view is that the current and proposed legislation provides adequate and satisfactory protection within the body of Northern Ireland law for ethos to be properly reflected.

The case made by the commission, and the GBA before them, was that the Department simply should adopt the legislative provisions that apply in other jurisdictions. Beyond that, they did not actually make a case.

The Department has not been told what is broken that we need to fix, and I am not clear on what the commission or the GBA are arguing that needs to change. There is a risk of making bad law in attempting to legislate for something when it is not clear what it is that we are trying to legislate for.

**Miss McIlveen:** I do not necessarily disagree with you, but I want to see what evidence has been used to back up the Department's argument. I also want to see the evidence that has been used for and against the arguments of the commission and GBA.

**The Chairperson:** Is there something that could be provided to the Committee to give it some indication about that issue?

**Mr C Stewart:** Could you clarify that for me, please? I am not sure what the Committee requires.

**The Chairperson:** It relates to what Michelle has set out. What happened in Scotland in 1926 is a specific example of how faith-based schools were placed into public ownership and certain provisions were made to protect the ethos of those schools. How is that different from the legislation that is before the Committee?

My understanding is — and reference was made to it in the submission by the commission — that in the Scottish model, specific provisions were made so that there was no dilution of ethos in Catholic schools that are governed by the state.

**Mr Poots:** In Northern Ireland there is a Catholic ethos in the Catholic sector. In the controlled sector, there is a Christian/Protestant ethos, albeit not as evident as that in the Catholic sector. However, school assemblies and religious education classes do occur, which are more focused towards that Christian/Protestant ethos. The Committee wants to know how that ethos can be protected in the legislation.

**The Chairperson:** How was the ethos of the transferors protected when they came into existence? Obviously, they transferred their ownership and became part and parcel of what was the then established institutions. How did they view the protection that was given?

**Mr C Stewart:** The transferors have made it clear that they feel aggrieved about the changes. The protection that was given was the right to nominate school governors and the right to reserved membership on the education and library boards. We understand their position and their concerns about any changes to either of those protections.

Our difficulty is with those people who say that we can adopt a simple model that is used in Scotland or elsewhere. There are many problems with that, the first being that the legislation for the Scottish model was enacted in the 1920s. A lot has happened since

then generally and in Northern Ireland specifically. We have a body of European legislation that now impacts on much of this. We have the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which determines the legislative capacity of the Assembly, and we have the European Commission of Human Rights, which not only affects statute law, but very significantly changes the body of case law and how it affects those sorts of matters. Therefore, it is difficult to say how exactly that 1920's legislation applies in 2009, never mind what the rationale was for making that particular change all those years ago.

We are happy to look into that further and to offer what information we can to the Committee, if you feel that that will be helpful.

**The Chairperson:** That will help to give us some idea of where this is taking us.

**Mr McGrath:** We will do our best. The issue is about what the legislation provided for, it is about cause and effect, and about the perception of whether ethos is being protected and fostered.

**Mr C Stewart:** What John is saying, and what I hinted at, is that I am not convinced that there will be a great deal of value for the Committee in expending a lot of time and effort on that model. The points that Michelle and Edwin made are very significant. At present, no clear statement about the ethos of controlled schools or the controlled sector has been written down anywhere.

We will look to the controlled sector representative body to get that sector to agree on a set of principles and values in order to start forming a description of the ethos that pertains to that sector. I mentioned that point to school principals during helpful early discussions. Once we have a clearer view of what that ethos is, we can come to a view about how it might be protected in legislation.

**The Chairperson:** What work is being done to try to get that definition? I know that this is probably a well-rehearsed point but, to date, we have not seen much progress on any work being done for the controlled sector. We have no business case, they are still behind and now you are putting another issue on the table — the definition of the controlled sector's ethos. What work is being done to try to address that huge deficit?

**Mr McGrath:** We are working on that, but are conscious of the fact that we had a lot on. As Chris said, we need someone to articulate and explain to us what the ethos is — it is not for us to commission an ethos. Edwin's and Nelson's interventions were helpful, because we are trying to promote conversations. Possibly, a question still exists over whether the controlled sector has a single ethos or whether there is a broader range, such as the examples that Edwin discussed.

**Mr McCausland:** That gets to the heart of the matter. This is not going to go anywhere unless there is agreement and acceptance at the heart of the Department about the ethos of the controlled sector. As you said, that is not a matter for the Department to determine. However, legislative obligations and other obligations will help to shape that.

Clearly, the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) has a role in this matter, but it is not the only player. Other organisations and interests should be involved, particularly with regard to the cultural as well as the religious ethos of those schools. The situation is not as complex as people make out. What percentage of children in the controlled sector is from the Protestant/unionist community?

**Mr C Stewart:** I cannot answer that today; we can add it to the grid.

**Mr McCausland:** It is probably about 95%. It would be useful if you could send on two things with the grid. One is the percentage of children from each background in each sector. Some 99% of children in Catholic schools are from the Catholic community. In controlled schools, 95% of children are from the Protestant community.

**Mr C Stewart:** It would not surprise me if those figures were correct, though within individual schools there will be variations.

**Mr McCausland:** Vere Foster Primary School in west Belfast is an example of a school with a varied intake. That is the only such school that I am familiar with in Belfast, though there may be others. In due course that school will close. I have spoken to folk who have connections with the school, and I believe that its closure is likely as part of a reorganisation in that area. Those children will, presumably, go to Catholic maintained schools or to Irish-medium schools.

In addition, we need to know what percentage of children in the Catholic maintained and controlled sectors come from ethnic minorities. This was a point that I made earlier to the representatives of the unions. It may be 1% or 1.5%.

**Mr C Stewart:** Again, that would be subject to considerable geographical variations. It would be much higher than that in some areas.

**Mr McCausland:** It will be helpful to have that information — for the Catholic maintained and the controlled sectors — as it will remove the myth that has grown up about the huge diversity of the controlled sector. That sector is much more homogenous than people suggest.

**Mr C Stewart:** I do not disagree. Neither do I disagree with the list of the features of controlled sector ethos described by Edwin. Most, if not all, schools in the controlled sector recognise those as elements of their

ethos. However, it has never been written down or clearly expressed in the past. Perhaps, many in that sector have never felt that they have a right to have such an ethos or to give clear expression to it. That is something that we need to move beyond quickly.

**Mr Poots:** It is an unspoken ethos.

**Mr C Stewart:** Yes, it is.

**Mr D Bradley:** I have a question about the role of sectoral bodies in relation to raising standards. You said that the sectoral bodies would take an interest in the performance of the schools and have a role in promoting high standards generally. How will that role interlink with that of the ESA in raising standards?

**Mr McGrath:** The ESA will have an executive role in helping to raise standards in schools. Sectoral support bodies will clearly have an interest in promoting high standards and contributing to the appointments to boards of governors. However, their role is pastoral, rather than executive.

There were different articulations this morning and last week as to the role of sectoral support bodies. They will help to support the sector without, necessarily, intervening in individual schools. The executive role is for the ESA. As Frank said earlier, we should fund the sectoral bodies sufficiently for what they need to do and no more. It is important that there is no confusion: promotion of and raising standards is the ESA's responsibility.

**Mr D Bradley:** The role of sectoral bodies in raising standards is, then, ill-defined.

**Mr McGrath:** We expect them to have an interest. The business cases indicate that. However, they will not have a statutory duty to do so. The duty to promote standards in the public sector, and the resources to do so, belongs to the ESA in conjunction with the ETI.

**Mr D Bradley:** Is it possible for the Committee to see the businesses cases that have been submitted?

**Mr C Stewart:** We intended to bring them to the Committee when they were concluded. It would be unfortunate to put the business cases into the public domain in that way while we are still in negotiation with the organisations. The sectors might find that unhelpful.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will we be able to see them at some future date?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** The Committee has written to the Department listing a whole range of concerns and information requests about clause 8, and it has tried to bring them all together. Chris said that the Minister would probably propose secondary legislation. Is any thinking emerging on independent appeals or regulation to address the concerns that we have about clause 8?

**Mr C Stewart:** For clarification, what I said, or what I intended to say, was that the Minister would consider a suggestion from the Committee that we should have subordinate legislation, rather than relying merely on guidance.

As regards the appeal or challenge mechanism, the suggestion that we floated earlier, which can be developed if it would be helpful, would be a specific link between the Department's power to direct in article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and a complaint by a board of governors that the ESA was somehow behaving improperly in relation to the discharge of its functions. That would not be a terribly difficult technical challenge, as there is a precedent for it in the legislation. It could be argued that existing legislation already allows for that. However, there would be value in bringing the respective provisions very closely together and associating them with the employment provisions in the Education Bill. The Minister would be willing to consider a suggestion from the Committee to that end.

**The Chairperson:** The Committee has put those matters in the letter, which has now gone, and will await a response.

Thank you very much. We will see you next week.

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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

25 March 2009

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## EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Mr Nelson McCausland  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr John O'Dowd  
Michelle O'Neill  
Mr Edwin Poots

### Witnesses:

Mr Frank Bunting	} Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Ms Avril Hall-Callaghan	} Ulster Teachers' Union
Mr Seamus Searson	} National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers
Mr Chris Stewart Ms Eve Stewart Mr John McGrath	} Department of Education

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** I hope that today's business will be shorter than last week's marathon session. The Committee will seek to avoid having so many and such protracted presentations in the future.

Today we will have presentations from the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU); the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). We will also hear responses from the Department — on today's presentation from the unions, and on the issues raised last week by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE).

Avril, Frank and Seamus; you are very welcome. Please make your presentation, and members will then ask questions.

### Ms Avril Hall-Callaghan (Ulster Teachers' Union):

We thank the Committee for the invitation to give evidence. The Bill is very important, and we have notified the Committee that there are a number of points on which we wish to speak.

Before I start, I will distribute a joint statement on the Education Bill that has been issued by the five recognised teaching unions in Northern Ireland. The main thrust of it is that we are absolutely convinced that the education and skills authority (ESA) must assume responsibility — as employing authority — for all sectors in education. Everybody must come into the tent, including alternative education provision, which Seamus will mention later. Otherwise, there will not be the equality within the education system that we feel is absolutely vital.

A number of things flow from that in relation to the redeployment of teachers and saving on duplication — we are horrified at the thought of a multiplicity of employers carrying out the same functions. Where would the control mechanisms be? That is the main message that the unions want to get across to the Committee today.

I understand that most of the other witnesses come from the alternative point of view. However, we represent the teaching force that the Bill will affect. Staff who work in schools alongside teachers will also be affected. The unions are certainly not happy about the thought of those staff working under different terms and conditions.

The second point is that we are concerned about the lack of specific reference to nought-to-six years' provision. The Department of Education is at present working on a review of nought-to-six provision. We are concerned that there has been no specific reference in the Bill, apart from a small mention of materials for young children being produced by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). There are rumours that there is an intention to, in some way, separate early-years provision from education, which we totally oppose. The unions feel that the years nought-to-six are a vital stage of a child's development. Any language, or other, difficulties would be picked up at that stage, and we feel that it is vitally important that an education professional is involved in the early-years provision.

I know that the curriculum has changed at that stage and that some people would argue that one does not need to have a teacher there, but that is not the case. Just because it is a more relaxed environment does not mean that same amount of professional input is not required. Teachers picking up problems at that early stage will help the whole system later.

We also feel that equity in funding for all sectors is essential. The Committee knows that the unions have been campaigning for equity between primary- and

secondary-sector funding, because we believe that most resources should be invested in the early stages in order to prevent problems developing later.

Retention of salaries at the centre would be welcomed. There is no point in trying to streamline an education system and then having many different people paying out salaries. The same principle applies to schemes of employment. It would be much better to have uniform schemes of employment. There should be no provision for schools to vary from that scheme.

The unions were interested to see in the Bill that employment for peripatetic teachers should be subject to negotiation with the schools. We certainly believe that it should be subject to negotiation. We favour a model that retains peripatetic teachers from within the teaching force instead of creating compulsory redundancies. A pool of peripatetic teachers of varying expertise should be maintained. In addition, teachers unions as well as the schools should be consulted about the use of those teachers. That is something that is lacking throughout the Bill — teachers' unions are not being acknowledged as one of the major stakeholders.

At present, the education system relies far too heavily on buying in expertise from outside. Therefore, we were concerned about the reference in the Bill to the commissioning of research. We feel that there is adequate expertise in the system to ensure that any required research is done by the people who know the system. When outside providers come in, they ask the people in the system for their views anyway; so, let us cut that out and put the money put into front line services.

We are concerned that the Bill does not go far enough in trying to rid us of the multiplicity of bodies involved in the education service. We were delighted when we thought that all the sectoral bodies were going, but now there is a suggestion that not only are they being retained, but attempts are being made to create new ones. If we are trying to streamline the system, surely we should be trying to exclude those bodies.

We are not saying that those sectoral bodies should not be able to comment, but they should do so in the same way as teacher unions. We are not funded out of the education budget, and other bodies, such as the Churches and the integrated education sector should fund themselves and leave the education budget intact for the education of children.

The General Teaching Council (GTC) is mentioned in the Bill. That is one of the areas in which there should be a statutory obligation for consultation with the teacher unions. We have no difficulty with the GTC in that regard. Indeed, we have a good relationship with the GTC because the Registrar has placed it as a high-profile, important item. We do not know what

the future holds, so we would like to have statutory provision for consultation.

Schools should operate on a multicultural basis. As members know, our society has changed drastically in recent years. There has to be a change of emphasis: schools should be open to all, and a diversity of cultures and opinions, for instance, is to be welcomed.

The governing body — the ESA — will be too small: eight to 12 people is not enough. If a couple of those people are not available on any particular day, then a small number of people could end up managing a huge employment sector. The number should be increased to 15 to 19 people, 25% of whom should be political representatives — which is what you would have wanted within your existing model. There should also be guaranteed places for trade unions at the table.

It is vital that the Department of Education retains the ability to direct the ESA, because we are sure that there will be times in the future when a guiding hand will be needed.

**Mr Frank Bunting (Irish National Teachers' Union):** I will be brief. I want to emphasise that the five teacher unions are of the view that there should be a single employing authority for all teaching and support staff in Northern Ireland. There is a range of reasons for that view, and I can go into those reasons later, if you wish.

With regard to clause 10 and the situation that we are moving into regarding redundancies and pensions, Ms Hall-Callaghan has suggested that there should be a provision in the Bill for the ESA to be able to employ panels of peripatetic teachers. That would be important, particularly for teachers in rural areas who, perhaps, will be subject to compulsory redundancies over the next decade.

Clause 13 relates to the provision of training. The broad thrust of the Bill is the need for accountable autonomy, and that means schools taking the lead. In the current model, professional development and in-service training are provided on a mechanical, statutory basis by the Curriculum Advisory and Support Services of the five education and library boards, with funding being diverted away from schools to the boards so that they can do that. I would like to see that changed to a mixed-economy model in which schools receive the lion's share of the budget. The GTC would have some responsibility for the budget, and there would be a smaller share for the ESA to deal with. That is generally in line with the thrust of accountable autonomy.

We value the role that the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) plays. It is currently under the auspices of the Department of Education, and we advocate strongly that that role be continued and that the inspectorate should not be separated from the Department.

**Mr Seamus Searson (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers):** Our central point is about the need to have a single, central employer. That is crucial to us, because it makes the most sense. It makes no sense for schools to want to be the employer and deal with all the legal situations. Why should they want to do that? They should be guided by the ESA, and that is one of the major messages that I want to get across this morning.

I shall take a slightly different tack and talk about the way in which schools operate. The important part of a school is what goes on in the classroom, whether that is in a field or in a special unit. As you might expect a representative from a teaching union to say, it is important to realise that teachers are an important part of the teaching and learning experience for youngsters. We want to emphasise that, but we also need a system that supports the teacher in the classroom. That is why schools, principals and management need to be able to support the teacher in the classroom; it should not be the other way around. Resources and support staff should be focused on supporting the teacher.

The whole idea of moving away from the current number of employers was to try to streamline the system, and the next step should be to streamline things inside schools. Schools are expected to carry out many duties, and teachers and principals are not the best people to do them. We need to focus on what schools are for, create structures and systems that will support teaching and learning in schools and allow all young people to reach their full potential. The challenge for the ESA is to create an educational support system that allows schools to focus on the activity in the classroom.

Some of the functions that have been talked about in other places do not make any sense. For example, the ESA should be able to relieve schools of bureaucratic and administrative burdens and offer a range of support services. If the ESA is to be the single employer, why is there a need for various employment schemes? That is unnecessary. A teacher working in Bangor should be treated the same as a teacher working in Derry, in the same situation, and that should also apply to support staff. Why would schools want to invoke extra work and extra responsibility? They have enough to do as it is.

Avril mentioned alternative education providers. Education does not simply apply to one school but to a whole range of units and outfits across Northern Ireland, and the ESA should have responsibility for all of those. Outreach centres such as Newstart Education Centre, Conway Mill Education Centre and Lagan Valley Educational Project are working and supporting youngsters who are outside the education system. In some instances, they rely on charitable funding, which does not seem to make any sense because those youngsters

are part of educational responsibility and need to be brought back into line.

Finally, provision for 14-to-19-year-olds is straddled across two Departments, and we see potential conflict with that in the future. An important consideration is who will be the lead partner for education of people between the ages of 14 and 19. We agree that the major issue is the importance of having a single employer. Why should we have a myriad of other obstacles in the way?

**The Chairperson:** As you are aware, today's edition of 'The Irish News' reports on a conflict between the teaching unions and the Catholic bishops on this issue, because it is central to the presentations that were made to the Committee last week on the single employing authority. The Catholic bishops argued that, as a result of the ESA becoming the single employing authority, there would be a threat to ethos. From a union's point of view, is that an issue?

**Mr Bunting:** I do not think so. The Church is generally responsible for the population of most of the governors of Catholic schools.

Provision has been made in the Bill for the trustees, as the owners of schools, to have a major say in how employment schemes and suchlike are developed. We do not envisage any threat to the ethos of any individual school. Indeed, we were surprised by the thrust of the bishops' and cardinal's statement.

Our experience with the CCMS, which is the single employing authority for all Catholic teachers throughout Northern Ireland, is that it shows the benefits for Catholic teachers of having a single employing authority. An example of that was when schools were being closed in the Belfast area and the responsibility for redeployment of staff was undertaken by the CCMS. It was able to redeploy teaching staff across Northern Ireland. Some teachers were moved from central Belfast to Lisnaskea, for example, simply because it also suited them to move back home for a variety of reasons. The fact that the CCMS was a single employing authority meant that it had the ability to do that.

The teachers who suffered most from the fact that there was no single employing authority were those in the controlled sector, because all that education and library boards were able to do, particularly in the post-primary sector, was to redeploy teachers from, for example, one controlled secondary school to another in a limited number of schools in their area. Therefore, there was total inequity in teachers' prospects between the controlled sector and the Catholic sector.

As Seamus and Avril have said, the creation of a single employment authority addresses that issue. It also enables teachers to be redeployed from post-primary controlled and Catholic secondary schools into grammar schools, and from Irish-medium into integrated schools.

Recently, Armagh Integrated College was closed. Its teachers have a single employing authority, in its board of governors, and do not have the ability to be redeployed elsewhere. Establishing a single employing authority will address such issues. Therefore, from the perspective of teachers and support staff, and in the interests of efficiency, establishing the ESA is basically a dream come true.

**The Chairperson:** Frank, I want to tease that out slightly. One of the concerns raised by CCMS and the NICCE — and I believe that some voluntary grammar schools have also raised this concern — is about the redeployment of staff. There is a worry — the reasons for which I cannot fully comprehend fully — about that matter. It seems to focus on the ESA's ability to take a member of staff who has taught in a maintained school and place that person in a non-maintained school, and vice versa. They argue that that is the big issue.

**Mr Bunting:** That can be addressed easily. The CCMS did a fantastic job; everyone accepts that. The boards also did a good job.

The ESA will have the ability to redeploy teachers. However, the actual decision-making for the employment of teachers will remain with the board of governors. Therefore, for example, the CCMS, and hopefully the ESA when it is established, places the names of teachers who need to be redeployed before individual boards of governors. Subsequently, those teachers are interviewed by a subcommittee of the board of governors, which then appoints to the position the teacher whom it believes to be meritorious. If there is not a teacher whom the board of governors wishes to employ, it is under no compulsion to employ or redeploy a teacher who has been placed before it by the central body. The entire thrust of protection of ethos, employment status and rights by the board of governors will remain exactly as it is.

**Mr Searson:** I want to start by saying that my interpretation is that there will be no change to what exists at present except that the final decision or control of the final decision will belong to the employer, which will be the ESA.

Boards of governors will appoint and dismiss their own staff as long as they follow the correct legal procedures, and the ESA will be ensuring that they adhere to those procedures. If a board of governors wants to dismiss somebody for the wrong reasons, the ESA should be able to step in and advise the board that it will encounter legal difficulties and other problems by using incorrect methods. That will be a safeguarding situation. An employer should take advice and guidance from the centre, which knows the law and the regulations. In reality, most boards of governors do not know the law. Schools working alone make up the law and end up in trouble afterwards.

Teachers are not made redundant because they are bad teachers; it is because there are not enough children to teach. That is different from trying to dismiss someone whose teaching standards are not up to the mark. If that is the case, there is a capability procedure, which is the correct procedure for somebody who wants to go down that particular road.

It is not the case that teachers are not fit for one school or another. Under present arrangements, many people who are redeployed are young teachers in their first three or four years of teaching. I do not think that schools will say that they cannot change young teachers and mould them to work a certain way. It is a bit of a red herring and is obviously hiding something else that they are trying to protect rather than coming forward and saying that it is in the interest of all schools.

We spend a lot of resources on training teachers, but we do not do look after them when they leave university and college. Every so often, we put them on a daily rate, and we do not have a scheme for them. The ESA must deal with that problem and find a way for young teachers to gain employment and become inducted into the education service. As I said earlier, if that is not possible, teachers need the support to move on. People have spun the story in an unfortunate way because, as Frank said, governors will have the final say as to whether a person fits in with their staff. If they reject that person, they should do so for good reasons.

**The Chairperson:** Before members ask questions, I want to tease that matter out a bit further. You have raised concerns about schools having the freedom to prepare schemes of employment. The Bill, as it stands, proposes different submitting authorities for employment and management schemes. However, we believe that the Minister is considering an amendment that will make the owners/trustees the submitting authority for all schools. Who should be the submitting authority that prepares the schemes of management and schemes of employment?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** We feel very strongly that there should be a uniform scheme of management. There is no reason for schemes to be duplicated. We are concerned that we will end up with a situation similar to that in England and Wales, where schools are tantamount to private institutions with their own conditions of service, and so on. We do not want to countenance such a situation in Northern Ireland.

**The Chairperson:** As regards the phrase “maximising school autonomy and centralisation”, do you believe that it is a case of one or the other, or is it a combination of both? Voluntary grammar schools and maintained schools say that they have autonomy that they do not want to give up. As collective representatives of teachers,

should functions be centralised, should local autonomy remain or is a combination of both preferable?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** Several functions should be centralised, and we have already suggested that —

**The Chairperson:** Employment is obviously a key one.

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** Yes. There are other areas that schools need to have control over, such as training, to which Frank referred. It is a mixed package.

**Mr Bunting:** It is an interrelationship. I know that many members of the Committee, including the Chairperson, serve as school governors. We believe that the concept of governorship in Northern Ireland, England and Wales is seriously flawed.

There must be a relationship between governors — who are basically unpaid volunteers who receive a limited number of hours of training for undertaking complex education and employment functions — and where their expertise may lead. For example, under the present arrangements, one governor from each school is designated to liaise with the principal about child-protection matters. I believe that as child protection is such an important, significant and difficult area, the person selected must have considerable professional experience in that area. Therefore, it may not be appropriate for a volunteer to assume such a role.

If you are dealing with, and giving advice to, teachers or support staff who are under investigation and, perhaps, suicidal, then you will want to ensure that they receive the best professional support possible. Therefore, the relationship between the central authority — the ESA — and governors is complex, and while we have governors, professional expertise must come from the ESA.

Hopefully, with the Committee's help, we may move to a more professional model for education, such as the one that exists under the delegated schools management system in Scotland.

**Mr Searson:** There is confusion about what the terms the Chairperson mentioned actually mean. They can mean different things to different people. In reality, how many decisions do schools have to make? The bottom line is that they must employ teachers; so, based on their budgets, they must decide how many teachers they can afford to employ, which will determine the curriculum they are able to offer.

Having paid for buildings, heating, meals, transport and all the other factors for which a school is responsible, the major decision left is how to deploy the remaining resources. Ultimately, little is recalled, so a school's autonomy amounts to how it uses that last piece of money. Autonomy might be exercised by a school deciding to spend money on extra equipment, such as an IT suite, or in choosing to spend money on additional

teachers, support staff or materials. Schools must be careful about the decisions they make; however, those decisions should be based on the quality of the education that they provide for youngsters.

Activities such as looking after school buses should be taken away from schools and dealt with somewhere else. Consequently, schools would not have a budget of £4 million or £5 million each; it would be a much smaller figure, which would reflect how much money they actually have to spend. What people mean when they use the word “autonomy” has yet to be teased out and explored further. Otherwise, we will end up with different meanings for different people, and that will cause difficulties in the future.

**Mr D Bradley:** I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I agree with Seamus. Last week, during our meeting with the NICCE, three different terms were used containing the word “autonomy”, and we are not sure whether each of those terms means the same thing. Therefore, we require more clarity on that subject.

Initially, one of the major selling points for the ESA was the £20 million per annum savings that were predicted. That money was to be reinvested in front line services; however, as a result of the financial situation, the economic downturn, and so on, we are told that that money might be used to plug various holes in the education budget. Therefore, we cannot be sure that the savings will go to front line services.

The Department's main rationale for the ESA now is raising standards. You did not mention that in your presentation. How effective do you think the ESA will be in raising standards in schools?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** That depends on how it goes about doing it. To date, we are very concerned about what is coming out of the ESA and out of the Department with respect to the ‘Every School a Good School’ policy. If the ESA is to be set up with the role of challenging schools — and that is what the chief executive designate is saying — I believe that that is totally wrong. Schools do not need to be challenged; they need positive support.

Starting off with a confrontation — which the word “challenge” indicates — will result in teachers getting nervous, and they will, perhaps, go into a defensive mode. That will not get the best out of schools.

I recently went to Finland, and one of the things that came across most was the fact that professionals there are left to get on with it. No inspectorial process whatsoever exists in Finland, and yet, its pupils achieve the highest results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys. Therefore, there is something about professional self-esteem and the fact that the vast majority of schools operate well and do the best for their pupils. As Seamus said, there is a small number of problems, but those are picked up by

the unsatisfactory teacher procedure and the existing inspection procedure. Therefore, we have concerns.

**Mr Bunting:** There are different ways in which to sell the ESA. I know from the experience of the CCMS that we are not simply supporting a central employing authority for teaching and support staff out of ritual. In a place such as Northern Ireland with a small system of fewer than 1,200 mixed-model schools, the only way in which we can move forward to implement the Department's sustainable schools programme is to have a single employing authority, whereby the actual workforce is being used more efficiently. Really, that is the key benefit that will sustain.

As the chief inspector and everyone else will acknowledge, the key deliverer as regards teaching and learning in schools is the teaching force. Having a single employing authority will be a major boon, particularly for teachers who are currently isolated in grammar schools, integrated schools, Irish-medium schools and controlled schools. Having one single employing authority will bring major benefits for all those sectors.

Shortly, the five teachers' unions will meet the chief inspector, at his invitation, to explore ways in which standards in education can be raised. That is the first time that those unions have been so invited by any part of the education administrative network.

I share the view that Avril outlined about adopting the English system. The London Challenge and the National Challenge in England, which try to drive up standards through the use of heavy inspections and rigorous accountability, has not worked. Rather, we believe that schools need to build on good practice, and we are keen to explore with the chief inspector how we can do that together.

**Mr Searson:** I agree with what has been said. The teachers are the way forward, and the teachers' unions are not the enemy. We wish to work with the Department, the ESA and whoever else to move the issue forward. We should be working together to raise standards for all young people.

**The Chairperson:** On that point, in the briefing paper, INTO says that it has a concern about the principles that underlie the new duty on boards of governors in clause 34 to promote the achievement of high standards of educational attainment. The worry is about that responsibility being put on boards of governors. Are you saying that that has been proven, because you make reference to the new Labour school improvement agenda? Do you think that that is now being replicated under the guise of 'Every School a Good School'?

**Mr Bunting:** All the teachers' unions were unhappy with the first draft of 'Every School a Good School'. Hopefully, the second draft, which is due to come out for consultation shortly, will be a significant improvement,

given the fact that there has been consultation between the Department and us.

In our view, clause 34 borrows from the ideology of the London Challenge and the National Challenge, which are used in England and Wales. Our colleagues in the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) told us that that has been found wanting in delivering improvements in standards in London and in the rest of England and Wales. That programme has been dropped in primary schools in those countries.

Challenging principles on a continuing basis and employing school improvement officers is not necessarily the best way forward. School improvement officers exist in England and Wales and have fairly plenipotentiary powers to overrule principals and governors on their school development plans and on other decisions. Although it is important to have a healthy challenge function for teaching and learning in all our schools, the balance must be correct.

**Mr D Bradley:** The key element in the ESA for the Department seems to be the raising of standards rather than its role as a single employing body. I understand why you are concerned about the employment aspect, but you are questioning the rationale of the Department, particular in relation to 'Every School a Good School'. I thought that the final version of that policy had been published.

In his report, the chief inspector mentioned specifically 'Every School a Good School' as a means of driving up standards. I am sure that that is something that you will want to discuss with the chief inspector when you meet him if you have issues about the approach that is advocated in that policy, which I previously described as too much stick and not enough carrot.

If you, as the representatives of the teaching force, disagree with the approach that the ESA will take to raising standards through that policy, which has also been endorsed by the Education and Training Inspectorate, there is a major difficulty. As you said, the key group in raising standards is the teaching force. Therefore, there has to be a better meeting of minds between those who represent the teaching force and those who believe themselves to be charged with raising standards. If you are working at cross purposes, standards will suffer.

There needs to be close co-operation between the teaching force and the administrators, in this case the ESA, if we are going to achieve the standards that we require. The chief inspector's report suggests that, although positive improvements have been made, there is still some distance to go in that regard. I hope that you are able to come to a meeting of minds when you meet the chief inspector, which will work for the benefit of children in the long term and the raising of standards.

Are teachers' conditions of service and employment not the same across the board, regardless of the employing body?

**Mr Bunting:** Yes, they are.

**Mr D Bradley:** You said that there is unevenness between various types of schools. You also said that there is a lack of clarity in salary policy and pension difficulties. Furthermore, you said that there is a lack of transparency in ethos, which responds poorly to challenges and so on. How can that be the case if the terms and conditions of service are the same across the board?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** There is one major difference — schools are not funded equally. Therefore, promotion opportunities are not the same for all teachers. That issue needs to be looked at, because there is more funding going into the grammar-school sector at the moment. Also, there are some schools that use honourariums and other allowances, and some may receive additional funds from parents. Therefore, there is a certain degree of inequity. The biggest inequity is probably in the non-teaching sector, where some schools have different terms and conditions than others. That is not justified.

**Mr D Bradley:** I hear that in the maintained sector promotional opportunities used to be advertised publicly in the school, applications invited, and so on. However, that situation seems to have changed, and there seems to be private negotiations between principals and individual teachers. Quite often, positions are not advertised. Furthermore, not all staff are always aware that individuals have been promoted. Has that scenario developed recently?

**Mr Bunting:** In a minority of schools — perhaps a large minority — there is some bad practice in areas of employment, promotions and in the implementation of salary policy statements. Emoluments — such as honoraria, to which Avril referred — have been given out without any degree of accountability. Moreover, significant failings of individual professional teachers or principals might not, up to now, have been addressed as robustly as we want, particularly in cases in which schools are in considerable difficulty and need help. The ESA will provide an opportunity for that to happen, and it is important that it has the power to do that. Furthermore, it is important to strike a balance between the ESA and schools in order to ensure harmonious working in the interest of pupils' teaching and learning.

**Mr D Bradley:** If I am not mistaken, in your submission, you acknowledged the work of the CCMS in raising standards.

**Mr Bunting:** Did I say that? I acknowledge the work that the CCMS and the education and library boards have done on a range of issues. Attainment in the Catholic sector has increased over the past 10 to 15 years, for which the CCMS has claimed some credit. I

agree with what Seamus and Avril said: the main credit should go to the collegiate working of principals and teachers in schools. The CCMS model, which has been borrowed for the ESA in a range of different ways, is helpful. It will abolish many arcane practices that relate to the employment of principals, and so on. A simpler, streamlined model will be introduced and will help everyone.

**Mr D Bradley:** Last week, the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education said that the CCMS has helped to raise standards in that sector because of its work with Catholic-maintained schools, and it argued that sectoral support should continue because it contributes positively to raising standards. Do you agree?

**Mr Bunting:** Every administrative post that is created militates against people's teaching and learning. We would much prefer the money to be diverted to teaching and learning, rather than being spent on creating sectoral support bodies and administrative support staff that will, allegedly, give sectors an advisory role. We do not see the logic in establishing four, five or six sectoral support bodies. We thought that when new education administrative bodies were being established, there would be a simple model in which all players would be members of the education advisory forum and would advise the Department of Education.

Consider a similar model in the Republic of Ireland, where the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA) is a much larger entity than the CCMS. CPSMA performs the same role with about three members of staff who are not funded separately by Government or through public funds, but, as I understand, by the Church. I do not see why such nanny-state support needs to be given to sectoral-support bodies in Northern Ireland — simply because support is given to one Church body, it has to be given to others, which would create other sectoral-support bodies along the line. We could end up with a number of sectoral-support bodies employing more than 100 staff.

The tendency has been for education administrative bodies, once established, to grow like topsy. When the CCMS was established, it employed seven or eight members of staff. It now has approximately 85 employees and, therefore, we must be careful. The Department wants to give additional capability to those particular bodies, but they do not need it. The existing members of staff know that perfectly well, because they receive all the necessary advice and support from within their own sectors.

**The Chairperson:** Frank, does that have an adverse effect on education? The worry, or fear, is that the result of raising concerns and issues, and moving away from the debate on efficiency to one on who runs the

schools, may lead to a more segregated and Balkanised education system than ever before. The opportunity exists to work together to the advantage of all children, as opposed to all children, but particularly those in certain sectors. The fact that there are so many sectors raises difficulties.

**Mr Bunting:** Other major strategies are within the Department of Education's ambit. For example, learning communities have been established within which post-primary schools from all sectors work more collaboratively. There is a progressive move in that respect. However, we see no logic in additional tiers of education administration being built in as well as the ESA.

The Catholic Church, the transferors, the Governing Bodies Association (GBA), the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta all have the capability to provide advice to the Department of Education on ethos, and on the education and learning in their particular sectors. Why do they need additional capability, the funding for which would come from the education budget? As Dominic said, that budget is under increasing pressure because of the state of the economy. All available money should be invested in teaching and learning.

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** We must also focus on professional development, and teachers must be allowed enough time to participate in that. That is how to raise standards.

**The Chairperson:** Frank, the one sector that you did not mention, and it is invariably omitted, is the controlled sector.

**Mr Bunting:** Sorry, I thought that I had mentioned the controlled sector. When I mentioned the transferors, I meant that to refer to the controlled sector.

**The Chairperson:** Where is that sector's capability to be at an equitable level with all other sectors? At present, there is no such equity.

**Mr Bunting:** We are still in the process of responding to the Department of Education's proposal relating to paper 20 on the review of public administration.

**The Chairperson:** The paper's author is sitting behind you.

**Mr Bunting:** He has much more capability than I have.

It is important for the working group proposed by the Department to address those issues.

**The Chairperson:** If we could establish that working group, it would be extremely helpful.

**Mr Bunting:** I absolutely agree. The only issue that INTO has is that the working group should be built on the existing expertise in the education and library boards. For reasons of exigency, I believe that the Department wants to select people to be involved in consultation

with the education and library boards. The education and library boards have been 100% responsible for the development and maintenance of the controlled sector. In my view, they have done a first-class job. There is a body of expertise in the boards that could be used to ensure that that sector is not treated any less equitably than another sector.

**Mr Lunn:** I will not take up much of your time, because, for once, I find myself agreeing with almost everything that is in the submission. I want to raise a couple of small points; however, I am more interested to hear the departmental response to your comments.

Your paper states that equity in funding for all levels is essential. Can you tease that out a wee bit for me? I do not believe that you mean equal amounts of funding, but rebalancing of amounts. By "schemes of employment", I presume that you mean a model scheme that could be varied slightly if necessary.

I am having quite a good week on the subject of the ESA, because, suddenly, the Catholic bishops and unions seem to agree with me. I am delighted.  
[Laughter.]

How many guaranteed places for trade-union reps do you suggest? In your submission, Frank, it states that the ESA should report to, and be subject to, scrutiny by the Assembly's Education Committee. Of course, it would be subject to scrutiny by the Committee, although I am not sure about formal reporting.

The multicultural reference is music to my ears.

Generally, you find differences of opinion between trade unions in the same sector. I have looked at all those submissions and I cannot find any differences in them. Are there any areas that you have not mentioned on which you do not agree?

*(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr D Bradley] in the Chair)*

**The Deputy Chairperson:** We have only half an hour or so left. [Laughter.]

**Mr Searson:** We agree on the important matters. Although certain issues may need further airing, we agree on the vast majority.

**Mr Lunn:** Deputy Chairperson, it is a bit rich for you to point out that we have only half an hour left. Those were short questions.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I believe that you misinterpreted my remark. Go ahead, Trevor.

**Mr Lunn:** I am waiting to hear from Mr Bunting on the issues that I just highlighted.

**Mr Bunting:** Representatives of two unions — the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and the NAHT — are not present; they must have fallen off the wagon. The five teachers' unions are of one view on

the matter. Our approach is absolutely seamless. That gives a lot of resonance to what is in the draft Education Bill. We believe that if it were enacted in that particular manner, with some of the minor caveats that we have brought forward, it would be extremely helpful.

**Mr Lunn:** The trade-union interests merit some mention. That is a fair point. Perhaps, the Department would say that they are included in that regard for the requirements of the professions. As I said, that is why I want to hear from the Department, rather than from yourselves, on the points that you have made.

**Mr Bunting:** There teachers' unions have had representation on the education and library boards, but none on any other entity, such as the CCMS. Meaningful consultation would be helpful, bearing in mind that, at the end of the day, the ESA will be the employer of teaching and support staff. Some adoption of the education and library board model in that particular category could be helpful.

**Mr Lunn:** I mentioned equity in funding for different levels. Presumably, you mean an increase in early-years funding?

**Mr Searson:** There is a question of funding or resources going to where there is need. The problem is that everyone assumes that a particular sector needs only this, and another sector needs only that. In fact, the needs of schools in particular areas must be considered. That must be levelled up. As Avril said, the early years are important, and that area is one of the poor relations in the funding arrangement. The whole way in which schools are funded must be reviewed at some point in the future.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** You said that you believed that the Education and Training Inspectorate should be part of the ESA, not separate from it.

**Mr Bunting:** No. It should remain part of the Department of Education and separate from the ESA. Some people advocated that the Education and Training Inspectorate should become independent of the Department of Education, but the inspectorate has a good professional relationship with schools and teachers' unions, and its present position in the Department of Education helps, rather than takes away from, its remit. We advocate the continuance of the Education and Training Inspectorate in the family of the Department.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Is there a case for the CCEA not to be a part of the ESA?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** There is no reason why it should not be a part of the ESA. The CCEA is part of the whole education system, so it should be in there.

**Mr Bunting:** The CCEA's current management and regulatory issues can be managed inside the ESA. There is no reason why the CCEA should not be part of the ESA, bearing in mind the size of Northern Ireland.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** The next question is from Michelle McIlveen.

**Miss McIlveen:** Unfortunately, by this stage there are few questions left to ask. Each representative body that has attended the Committee over the past few weeks has put forward strong arguments for strengthening its own position, and you have not let us down with that. Will you expand on where you see your role in the ESA? You said that you wanted the trade unions to be mentioned in the legislation. How many places do you feel that you should have on the ESA board?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** Public appointments to the ESA board are a difficulty. Presumably, if some mechanism were in place to ensure that councils or political parties could nominate, that difficulty could be got around. We will not want a huge representation, because it is important to have a balance of the community in the ESA grouping. We believe that we should have a place on the board as of right, rather than maybe or maybe not being on it.

**Miss McIlveen:** Have you been given any indication from the Department that you might be excluded?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** We have not, but there is a difference between being able to apply through a public-appointments process and being assured of having a presence. Such a presence is assured in the Labour Relations Agency and in the industrial court.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** If you were on the board of the body that employed your members, would that compromise your position, given that your responsibility is to stand up for your members' rights against that organisation?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** That did not affect us in the operation of the education and library boards. We had nominees on those boards. That proved to be helpful, because it meant that the practitioners' voices were heard directly by the management.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Is there any precedent in UK legislation for the type of consultation that you advocate?

**Mr Bunting:** We are asking for representation. I do not think that there is a precedent for that.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** We could ask the Research Services to look into that.

**Miss McIlveen:** Will you continue with the point about the fact that you feel that your role should be strengthened in the ESA?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** We already mentioned the GTC, and about being written into that part of the legislation. We represent teachers, who are a huge influence on the education service. So as long as we are written into the legislation, we will not be left out of the process. If a statutory requirement is placed on people to consult,

they will do so, but, if we are not specifically mentioned in the Bill, there will be a tendency to put us to one side and talk to us later. We want to be an integral part of the process, in the interests of the children. We bring the perspective of the teacher, who is the front line worker.

**Mrs O'Neill:** A lot of ground has been covered, but Frank and Avril mentioned the employment of a panel of teachers. On my reading, clause 10 includes that provision. Why do you think that it is not, or why do you believe that an amendment is needed?

**Mr Bunting:** It is difficult to know the legislative and the practical outworking of that. We have been making representations on the matter to the Department for a considerable time and have received no reassurance.

We are moving rapidly towards a situation this year when there must be a panel in place. We would be more than happy to accept an assurance obtained by the Committee that the ESA is capable of employing a panel of teachers, particularly for the type of exigencies that we have outlined. In those circumstances, we would be content to let the legislation sit.

*(The Chairperson [Mr Storey] in the Chair)*

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is something that the Committee can put to the departmental officials.

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** The other thing that we have been working on is a winding-down scheme, which involves teachers at the end of their careers — who have accumulated a lot of expertise and experience — would be able to reduce their workloads and perhaps enter that pool of peripatetic teachers. However, that is another issue about which we have come to brick wall with the Department.

**Mr McCausland:** Paragraph 14 of the UTU submission states:

“Whilst the UTU accepts that it may be necessary on some occasions to commission research it would state its very strong reservations about the amount of public funds currently used in employing commercial companies to carry out research.”

Have the unions any understanding of what is currently spent on research?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** We have no idea of the level of expenditure, but we have recently been advised by Gavin Boyd that he will again outsource work on the setting up of all the ESA structures, yet people in the boards know all those structures inside out. Nevertheless, he is buying in resources on the grounds that he does not have the necessary expertise.

**Mr McCausland:** The unions state:

“schools should operate on a multi-cultural basis in the interests of unifying our society”.

How do you see that working out across the different sectors?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** I am a great believer that there should not be different sectors. I think that we should all come together and this is the one thing that may unite people in Northern Ireland. In the context of a multi-diverse European society, I believe that we should be thinking more of bringing people together — allow for those sectoral differences by all means, but do so under one roof.

**Mr McCausland:** If there were sectors, which there may be, how do you see multiculturalism working out across those sectors?

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** It is very difficult to represent a multicultural society if people are put into separate boxes. The Lisanelly site at Omagh is the single good major development that is underway at present. There at least the maintained and controlled sectors are being brought together in one campus. That may be some sort of halfway measure — I would like to go the whole way — but at least that starts the process.

**Mr Bunting:** The current situation is a mess. Under the 1986 Order, the education and library boards were legally responsible for the planning and development of schools in their respective areas. However, that never actually worked for the Catholics, because when the CCMS was created under the 1989 Order it was given the statutory responsibility for the provision of Catholic education. I believe that the ESA presents an enormous opportunity to remove all that dysfunction. The ESA — in collaboration with all the relevant bodies — can work for a more planned schools system. As we move forward towards collaboration and sustainable schools, that will maximise the opportunities for all kinds of education including multiculturalism.

**Mr McCausland:** Have you any idea what percentage of children from ethnic minority communities attend controlled and Catholic maintained schools?

**Mr Bunting:** Not off hand.

**Mr D Bradley:** One point occurred to me as you were answering Nelson's question. Is it possible for the sectoral support to be located within the ESA? In the same way that there are different sections within the Department of Education, there could be a section within the ESA for Irish-medium, controlled and maintained schools. It would provide sectoral support under one roof, and there would be opportunities for coming together. It would be easier to collaborate, as you suggest they should do. I am unsure whether the various sectors would agree with it, but is it a possibility?

**Mr Bunting:** I would say that it is not.

**Ms Hall-Callaghan:** I think that it could work, but I do not know whether the sectors would accept it as sufficient.

**The Chairperson:** Frank, you referred earlier to the education advisory forum. The Committee does not know much about it other than its name. We do not know who will be on it or what its role will be. Do you think that that would be preferable to having all these sectoral bodies? There is some weight to the argument that the sectoral bodies should not only exist, but that they should be provided for in statute. In addition to having the CCMS, integrated and Irish-medium sectoral bodies, we need the GBA — the grammar school sectoral body — represented, and also a body to represent the controlled sector. We could end up having more sectoral bodies than we have ever had.

**Mr Bunting:** We are baffled as to why we need sectoral support bodies in education in Northern Ireland when they are not needed in the Republic of Ireland, which has almost exactly the same system of education. The Catholic and Protestant Churches and the other interests in the Republic are content, yet in Northern Ireland there is a completely different interpretation as to how education administration should be supported. There is a major mismatch, and there must be an explanation for it.

The Department originally brought forward the proposal for an education advisory forum. That is why it is wrong of Michelle McIlveen to talk about our looking for more power. Technically speaking, we are not looking for more power. As a stakeholder, the teachers' unions were to be represented in the education advisory forum.

All the other interests that are now being supplemented and artificially created as sectoral support bodies were supposed to be in the education advisory forum. That was supposed to be a strategic policy advisory group for the Department. That is such common sense that we supported it 100%. The Department has done a fair bit of work on it and there are papers available to the Committee, which would be helpful.

**Mr McCausland:** How would you select representation to that forum from the controlled sector?

**Mr Bunting:** That is one of the functions of the working group that the Department is proposing in paper 20. Paper 20 is exceptionally interesting. It shows the complexity of the controlled sector and how that needs to be brought forward. I will not second-guess the working group: it is for them to answer your question.

**The Chairperson:** You refer to “the complexity of the controlled sector”. What is meant by that phrase? The figures indicate that more than 90% of children who attend controlled-sector schools come from the Protestant community — what is complex about that?

**Mr Bunting:** There is nothing complex about that. I am just saying that there has been a growing body of controlled-sector schools over the past 10 or 15 years: for example, there are now Irish-medium schools in

the controlled sector. Therefore, to answer Nelson's question, a mechanism that represents 100% of children in the controlled sector needs to be found.

**The Chairperson:** Avril, Seamus, and Frank, thank you very much for your submission. You are welcome to stay and listen to the departmental representatives' comments — or their rebuttal, as it has been referred to. I am sure that you had those in the past.

**Mr Bunting:** That is a very polite way of putting it. *[Laughter.]*



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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

1 April 2009

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## EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mrs Mary Bradley  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Mr Nelson McCausland  
Mr Basil McCrea  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr John O'Dowd  
Mrs Michelle O'Neill

### Witnesses:

Mr John McGrath	}	Department of Education
Mr Chris Stewart		
Ms Eve Stewart		

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** Mr McGrath, thank you for your patience. We have the paper, and I want to raise one specific point. Members will have questions, and we will try to get to them as quickly as possible rather than go through the whole paper.

**Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):** Yes, that will be fine. I will make a couple of remarks, and Mr Stewart will refer to some of the issues that have been highlighted this morning rather than track through the papers.

It was an interesting discussion. From the Department's, and the Minister's, point of view, we welcome the chief executives' support, on behalf of the boards, for creating a single system — one that recognises diversity and creates a regional authority that gives appropriate recognition and importance to children's services, youth services and early-years services. It gives regional policy with local flexibility.

The system is based on accountable autonomy for schools — autonomy for schools to decide how they will attain standards and how they will secure services and training, which will be matched by accountability for those outcomes. The ESA will support and challenge

schools. Essentially, it will be a model where, in the case of many schools, they move from being in a command-and-control system to a role where they are at the centre of the commission.

Some of the chief executives said that they had issues that needed to be clarified or that amendments needed to be made to the Bill. Legislation is difficult. The Chairperson described it as an onion: it is complex; people do not always get the right interpretation first time, and, perhaps, some mist surrounds the Bill. We may have helped to diffuse some of the mists of people's interpretations in earlier weeks, and I am reasonably sure that we can dispel most of the mists surrounding the issues that our chief executive colleagues have just raised. I hope that we will be able to do some of that now and, if not, we will deal with them at the next session.

**Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education):** I am conscious that the Committee is pressed for time, so I will keep my presentation quite short. There are three issues that I would like to cover; the others, as the Chairperson said, have been covered in the paper.

I hope that Members will forgive me for starting with two technical issues. Nevertheless, they are significant, and a clear explanation may help to avoid some of the misunderstandings that might otherwise be perpetuated.

In several of the boards' submissions, and in the submissions from some of the other stakeholders, the view was expressed that the Bill does not cover pre-school education or nursery schools. In fact, it does. Clause 2(2)(a) includes pre-school education, but the references are to "educational services".

That term is included specifically to cover pre-school education. As we discussed briefly last week, it is intentionally broad because that is necessary to reflect the diversity and the evolving nature of early-years services. It is simply incorrect to say that the Bill does not cover pre-school education.

Gordon Topping answered his own query about whether nursery schools are included. The definition of nursery schools falls within the definition of primary schools. The definition of primary schools is in the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 rather than in the Education Bill. As we discussed previously, those pieces of legislation must be read and construed together, as outlined in clause 52 of the Education Bill.

I will now discuss an even more dry and technical issue. There has been considerable debate and comment about the construction of clause 2 and whether to combine youth services and early-years provision, which are currently separate. They are covered by separate provisions because it would be extremely difficult to convey those services in a single provision

without damaging youth services and, specifically, without restricting the age range until which youth services can be provided.

Early-years educational services and schools focus on children and young people, and existing legal definitions set the age boundary at 18 — or 19 in secondary education. However, youth services are routinely provided for people up to the age of 25. Therefore, if we simply combined the provisions, we would have to limit the provision of youth services to people up to the age of 18. In order to retain the flexibility that colleagues and stakeholders in youth services have told us they need, we have created separate provisions.

I will now move to the more substantive policy issue. The employment arrangements in the Bill featured significantly in this morning's discussions and in previous Committee meetings, and it is the issue that stakeholders raise most frequently. I will begin with a brief recap of the intention of the employment arrangements.

In essence, the arrangements are the CCMS model applied to all schools. Different models could have been chosen. The GBA and, more recently, the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education argued that all 1,251 schools should be separate employers. The argument that the Committee heard this morning supported the concept of a single employer with a limited role for boards of governors — in effect, every school a controlled school. Those two options might have been chosen. However, the Minister chose to apply a third model — the CCMS model — to all schools.

In practice, all staff in all grant-aided schools will be employed by the ESA. The ESA is the employer in education law and in employment law, and contracts of employment will be between the ESA and members of staff. Boards of governors will have a strong autonomous role and will discharge employment functions on behalf of the ESA, which is the employer. In essence, it is a delegated model. Boards of governors will make decisions on employment matters and, in doing so, will discharge functions that are delegated to them by the ESA.

Schemes of employment will outline the delegation arrangements and the detailed role of boards of governors, as covered by clauses 3 to 12. The Department recognises that various stakeholders and the Committee have outlined — particularly in recent weeks — the need for greater clarity and certainty on the detail of the arrangements and the content of the employment schemes. The Department has heeded that message.

Until now, the intention has been that the ESA would provide guidance on the required detail. However, given the concerns that have been expressed, the Minister

is prepared to consider the need for subordinate legislation rather than guidance to govern the content of employment schemes. Therefore the Bill could be amended to include a provision for the Department to make regulations on schemes of employment. Such regulations could be made subject to Assembly control and most certainly would be subject to scrutiny by the Committee.

The enabling provision that could be introduced to the Bill could state that the regulations might, among other things, specify the matters that must be included in schemes of employment and the form in which such schemes must be drawn up. Moreover, it might specify the functions that must be carried out by boards of governors, other functions that must be carried out by the ESA, or functions that could be carried out by one or the other depending on what is decided by the schools and written into the schemes.

A further provision could be included — it is related to the other concern that the Committee raised — that would permit a board of governors to make a complaint to the Department if it believed that the ESA had acted in breach of, or in some way contrary to, the scheme of employment. If the Department were satisfied that a breach had occurred, it could use its power of direction under article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 to remedy the matter.

It is our view that, taken together, those measures — if they were to be taken forward — would provide the clarity and the certainty that boards of governors, other stakeholders and Committee members are looking for. However, the Minister would welcome the view of the Committee as to whether that would be a satisfactory response to the concerns that have been raised.

There is a great deal more that I could say, but I will stop now for members' questions.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Chris. That is obviously something that we wanted to talk about. We would like to see, at an early stage, what form the subordinate legislation would take. You gave us an idea of the likely content of that enabling provision in your written submission.

**Mr C Stewart:** Possibly part of it; it would not necessarily be limited to that provision. The written submission comprises our initial thoughts about the bones of the regulations, but other issues that would have to be addressed in order to provide clarity could also be included.

**The Chairperson:** The issue has come to us now, and we will have to take a view on whether it is enough to satisfy the concerns that have been raised.

**Mr McCausland:** My questions were on matters that carried over from last week's meeting.

**The Chairperson:** We will deal with them now.

**Mr McCausland:** Last week, I asked for information on how to ensure that governors in the sector are sympathetic to the Catholic ethos. How long will it be before we can get an answer to that question?

**Mr C Stewart:** I apologise for not providing you with all the information for which you asked. I understand that we have sent you some of the figures that you were looking for; perhaps they have not yet reached you. I will endeavour to provide that before next week.

**Mr McCausland:** We will be on holiday next week.

**The Chairperson:** Was that information sent to the Committee or to Nelson?

**Mr C Stewart:** I will have to check that.

**Ms Eve Stewart (Department of Education):** It was sent to the Committee Clerk.

**The Chairperson:** We have not seen that yet.

**Mr McCausland:** Michelle wanted to ask about another paper.

**Ms E Stewart:** Was her question about the ethos paper? A question was asked last week about ethos and whether any work had begun on the ethos paper.

**Mr C Stewart:** That work is in hand; we are not in a position to bring a paper back to the Committee just yet. We will endeavour to do so as soon as we can.

**Mr B McCrea:** In your remarks on clause 8 in your written submission you seem to be pretty sure that boards of governors will not be allowed to deviate from anything. Chris asked whether the Committee would be satisfied with what was put forward. I suppose that we are driven by what other people think, but there is a deep concern about the reinforcing of the point that control of the contract of employment is control over everything else. I am not sure that we will resolve that issue. Everything I see reinforces the notion that the situation is as you described — that the ESA is responsible, and that is that.

**Mr C Stewart:** I would not put it quite like that. You have heard contrasting views from stakeholders in recent weeks. The GBA would certainly say — and the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education is coming closer to the same view — that the ESA will have too much power and control, and because the ESA will be the employer, boards of governors will have no autonomous role. There is a sense today from the education and library boards that they hold the opposite view — that we have gone too far and have allowed too much autonomy and leeway for boards of governors to do their own thing, and that there is insufficient control for the poor unfortunate employing authority, which has to pick up the tab if something goes wrong.

It is interesting that there are two such contrasting views and interpretations of the same provisions. Our response is that neither is correct. Colleagues from the education and library boards describe the Bill as a fudge; we describe it as a balance. There is a single employing authority and there is a single employer. There is one organisation that will hold the contracts of staff, but in a delegated model decisions will be made by boards of governors in the name of and on behalf of the ESA.

In our view, notwithstanding the concerns that we acknowledge about the need for more detail and clarity, the crux of those arrangements is a balanced model, in which there is a single employer, but which involves the delegation of a very strong autonomous role to boards of governors. It is, in essence, the CCMS model, which, in recent weeks, members have heard described as working very effectively in the maintained sector, and as involving a light-touch intervention where necessary. Those are positive features that we wish to see as part of the new model.

The Department does not want any more than the GBA would want; it does not want a heavy-handed interventionist approach from the ESA. Equally, it does not want a laissez-faire approach, which would leave boards of governors, in particular, feeling unsupported and unassisted in discharging the significant responsibilities that they are given. We are looking for balance, and the closest current model to that is most definitely the CCMS approach.

**Mr B McCrea:** You said that it was interesting that different folk could draw different conclusions from the same piece of legislation; I drew a different conclusion from what the boards' representatives were saying. I thought that they were saying that there was a lack of clarity; that there was a statement in support of maximum devolved autonomy, but that they were actually getting a more centralised response.

I took them to be calling for a decision one way or the other, so that the appropriate arrangements could then be made. I think that the nub of the issue is that people hear the Department stating that, rest assured, it is not its intention to do this, that or the other, but when they read what is written down, the legal interpretation from some quarters is something different. I reiterate that I think that is the nub of the problem. Obviously, one can extend the employment issue to all the other issues, including educational psychologists etc, as Gordon Topping did. However, is the Department aiming for a deregulated oversight model, or is its view that that is too much of a burden for many people to carry and that it must be done centrally?

**Mr C Stewart:** The aim is very much to establish a deregulated oversight model, but there is a more general point to be made in that it is possible to put a great deal

of detail in primary legislation — much more than the Department has done. That, in fact, has been the approach in education over the last 35 years, which is why there is approximately three times the volume of primary legislation on education than there is on health. If you add up the 11 Orders, there are 674 articles and 60 schedules. If those regulations were to sit on one's desk, they would make a pile about six inches high. One may regard that as a good thing or a bad thing; there are different ways in which it can be done.

One of the consequences of that is that every time something needs to be changed, you go back to the primary legislation. In taking forward the review of public administration (RPA), the Department's policy was to put as little detail as possible in the primary legislation. We recognise that the particular issue under discussion has given rise to very significant concerns on the part of stakeholders and the Committee, and that there may be a need to shift the balance and put more detail into primary and subordinate legislation.

**Mr McGrath:** The detail would explain the model; it would not change it. Chris made the point that, a couple of weeks ago, the CCMS representatives pointed us to the model that they use — an employing authority with a light touch. That demonstrates that a balance can be struck, and that it can work. That is the issue that people have to understand; once all the detail is determined, it will explain the model. People have to recognise that it can — and does — work.

It is a sensitive issue, and there is a spectrum, but we are trying to strike a balance by setting up a single system. We see a single employing authority at a strategic level as being the cement around that system, as opposed to having five different systems. There will be maximum delegation to schools, and, on the other side, schools will do their best to meet and drive up standards and will be held to account for that. That is analogical with the way in which the CCMS has worked, and with the improvements in the Catholic maintained sector over the past number of years.

**Mr Lunn:** We had a discussion about the inspectorate not being independent. Are you aware of any particular reason for that being the case in the first place?

**Mr McGrath:** I cannot go back into the mists of time. However, you rightly asked what was broken that needed to be fixed? There is no evidence. I hesitate to speak for the current inspectorate or for previous inspectorates, but I think that they would take a dim view if they thought that there was an implication that there had been any constraint on the independence with which they did their work.

Clearly, there is separation. However, the concept of having professional advisers whose role it is to give independent advice but who work as part of a Government Department is used across the system.

Nationally, the Chief Medical Officer is responsible for advising the Government on the state of public health, but he is also part of the Department of Health. The Chief Medical Officer has the same role in our Health Department. It is a sophisticated model, and we have no difficulty with how the inspectorate operates at the minute. We would be wary of suggesting that another body should be set up simply to solve a problem that when there is no evidence that it existed in the first place.

**Mr C Stewart:** John and I worked in the health field for many years, and we never felt that any of our chief professional colleagues were in any way impeded from telling us when they thought we got things wrong.

**The Chairperson:** I will return to an issue that we still have not had any feedback from you on. The Minister is considering amending the Bill so that the owners of schools would be the submitting authority. We still do not know what the ownership body of the controlled sector will be. Has any thought been given to retaining an element of the existing education and library boards so that they would become the submitting authority? In that way, inequality would not arise as a result of some trustees being treated separately from schools in the controlled sector, which would be subject to public appointments procedure and to section 75 requirements. Basically, it would be a non-departmental public body.

**Mr C Stewart:** I have certainly made the Minister aware of that suggestion. However, she has not yet responded formally. We recognise that that would be a very significant policy change. I am sure that the Minister would welcome a formal view from the Committee on that before coming to a conclusion.

**Mr McGrath:** I think that it appears that it would makes things very untidy.

**The Chairperson:** More untidy than they currently are?

**Mr McGrath:** Certainly, given where we are trying to get to.

**The Chairperson:** Do you accept that we are currently not in a very good position?

**Mr McGrath:** I think that there is a general view around the table that we would not have chosen to start to devise an education system from this position. However, in trying to move forward and modernise, I think that retaining aspects of the old model for particular consideration is not the way to deal with some of the issues. Granted, there is an issue around ownership bodies and the submitting authority. That may be best dealt with in the context of creating a controlled state body.

**The Chairperson:** In January, the Committee sent a letter to the Department containing a list of issues around which members still had concerns and on

which information was required. In March, we updated that list, and another letter was sent. Can we expect a response to that letter after the Easter recess?

**Mr C Stewart:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Many of the issues that were raised this morning are contained and summarised in that letter, therefore, it would be very helpful to get some response.

Chris, John and Eve, thank you very much. Do not eat too many Easter eggs over the break.



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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

1 April 2009

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### EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

#### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mrs Mary Bradley  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Mr Nelson McCausland  
Mr Basil McCrea  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr John O'Dowd  
Mrs Michelle O'Neill

#### Witnesses:

Mr Gregory Butler	} Southern Education and Library Board
Mr David Cargo	} Belfast Education and Library Board
Mr Barry Mulholland	} Western Education and Library Board
Mr Stanton Sloan	} South Eastern Education and Library Board
Mr Gordon Topping OBE	} North Eastern Education and Library Board

**The Chairperson (Mr Storey):** Gentlemen, you are most welcome to the Committee for Education; I am delighted that you are here. Gordon, I will hand over to you to make a presentation, after which members will ask questions.

**Mr Gordon Topping OBE (North Eastern Education and Library Board):** Thank you for that welcome. We are delighted to join the Committee this morning to express our views on the Education Bill. I am sure that the date has nothing to do with your calling us today.

**The Chairperson:** No, but it does have something to do with the departmental officials who will follow you.

**Mr Topping:** I assure you that everything that we have to say is serious.

The Committee received a response to the Bill from the boards. I will present the background issues and an overview, and my colleagues will provide some detail on the specific strategic issues that the Bill raises.

Since the announcement of the decisions associated with the review of public administration in November 2005, we have supported the proposed changes and worked co-operatively. Today, for example, part of our organisation has been hived off and is now part of the new Northern Ireland Library Authority. We assisted with that process and in the creation of the education and skills authority (ESA). We made proposals on how the ESA might be progressed and provided advice through various groups. Ultimately, all the changes must be to the benefit of the children and young people whom we serve.

Our support for a regional education authority was based on the need to create an all-inclusive authority that manages an education service, is cohesive rather than fragmented, and has the legal basis to ensure that it can manage the authority effectively — that means a regional service that is locally delivered. After all, the many different areas of Northern Ireland have different needs: inner-city Belfast, for example, has different needs from rural Fermanagh. We contend that services must be tailored to meet those disparate needs and that a regional service should be locally delivered.

Generally, children are at school for between six and seven hours a day for approximately 37 weeks each year. Over recent years, we have dramatically improved the outcomes for young people, but we recognise that many external factors affect schools' performance. We must further improve educational outcomes, and that requires intervention not only in schools but on other issues. That leads us to the conclusion that a children's services function must be developed.

Since we established our position, the political situation has moved on. For the Second Stage of the Bill, the Assembly has now committed to the principles enshrined in the Bill. Nevertheless, any new authority should be all-inclusive and incorporate all sectors; it should have the legal basis to manage the service effectively, have a children's services function, and have a local dimension to facilitate the local delivery of a regional service.

Unfortunately, we see little or no mention of those issues in the Bill. Although it is important to get on with making changes — after all, four years have passed since the announcement was made in 2005 — it is also important to get them right. Clause 2(1), "Functions and general duty of ESA" states that the ESA has a duty:

"to promote, and co-ordinate the planning of, the effective provision of schools".

However, it will have no responsibility for overall planning, and we see little difference between what is proposed and the present flawed system.

The legislation is complex and technical, and it requires the reader to know and understand previous legislation. The Bill is a once-in-a-life-time opportunity to create Northern Ireland legislation for a Northern Ireland service, to consolidate education legislation, as was done in 1986, and simplify it. Unfortunately, that chance appears to have been missed.

Following that short introduction, I ask my colleagues to comment on specific issues in the Bill. Mr Cargo will lead on employment issues.

**Mr David Cargo (Belfast Education and Library Board):** Thank you, and good morning.

As our statement to the Committee makes clear, a single employer follows logically from a single authority. However, some clauses give us cause for concern.

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 created the concept of the employer and the employing authority; that has caused many problems in the system over the past 20 years, and we hoped that the Bill would clarify them. However, the Bill seems to perpetuate the confusion. The ESA is to be “the employing authority”, but clause 3(1) implies employer status. The former perpetuates the current problems; the latter simplifies the situation and, in effect, makes boards of governors subcommittees of the ESA under its control. There needs to be clarity on this issue and on contracts of employment and the liability associated with them.

Equality is at the heart of the Minister’s agenda, yet when dealing with the transfer of staff into the ESA, that principle appears to have been set aside. Staff are to be treated differently: civil servants are given preferential treatment over board staff and teachers are treated differently from other staff in schools. That needs to be resolved before the ESA is established.

Furthermore, the ESA implementation team (ESAIT) appears to have given little thought to how to minimize inequality of treatment once the ESA has been established. We are also unclear about how the qualifications that the Catholic sector requires of its teachers can be accommodated in a single organisation without giving rise to inequalities of treatment for teachers in the controlled sector. We welcome clause 11(5), which removes staffing costs from school budgets. We have long highlighted that as one of the main reasons for surpluses and deficits in the system. At present, budget management is too closely aligned to the age of teaching staff.

Finally, we are concerned at the proposals in clause 11 for voluntary grammar schools to pay staff. If one

of the key drivers for the ESA is to achieve economies of scale in service delivery and thereby reduce costs, it is foolhardy and inefficient to consider such proposals to be enshrined in legislation.

**Mr Topping:** We leave the employment issue and move to the role of the ESA in providing training and advisory services.

**Mr Stanton Sloan (South Eastern Education and Library Board):** I would like to address clause 13:

“ESA to provide or secure provision and advisory and support services for schools”

and, to a lesser extent, clause 19. Clause 13 covers all staff in schools, teaching and non-teaching. Ordinarily, that would mean the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS); however, boards provide a range of other support and advisory services to schools: education welfare, educational psychology, services for child protection, peripatetic services, services of local management of schools officers who work with schools and help them with budgets and human resources and others. All those services are funded centrally but are provided directly to schools, so more than 90% of boards’ budgets go directly into schools; some 60% is delegated and 30% goes to services.

The class is seen by many as the mainstay, particularly because of its role in raising standards. Gordon referred in his introductory remarks to the need to raise the standards of achievement of young people all over the Province. For that reason, it is vital that there be a properly established and properly resourced support service that must be delivered locally — albeit managed regionally.

It would have certain statutory powers, which, we believe, are missing at the moment. I want to highlight three main points. First, clause 13 deals with providing or securing the provision of training. There is a concern that that will lead to the commissioning of services; services would no longer be centrally funded. A regional policy is necessary for regional initiatives such as literacy and numeracy, for example. Will there be a regional service or will the ESA simply commission services from private individuals or private bodies? We need clarification on that.

Secondly, clause 19 confers on the ESA the power to undertake commercial activities, and we would like clarity on whether that could be extended to schools. I am aware that, in certain areas in England, money that was held centrally was given to schools to purchase their own services or buy in services. In many cases in England, that was overturned because it was unsuccessful.

In Northern Ireland, and in my own board in particular where I have talked to principals — especially of small schools — the money that they get would

not enable them to partake of the range of support services or training that they need. There is potential for misinterpretation and charging.

Thirdly, underachievement is something that engages us all. At the moment, the board, through its Curriculum, Advisory and Support Service and, indeed, through other services, has no statutory right to intervene in a school. We strongly believe that there should be a statutory basis for intervention when underachievement is identified in the school, either at individual teacher level, whole school level, or leadership level. Those are three key issues for the support services.

**Mr Topping:** We move on from the support function of the ESA to the Youth Service, with which Barry Mulholland will deal.

**Mr Barry Mulholland (Western Education and Library Board):** I want to raise two issues: the first may be considered a matter of semantics; the second is another opportunity lost. The first is youth services. Clauses 2 set out firmly that youth services are part of education, and that is welcomed by all those in the education and library boards and youth services. However, the fact that youth services are not incorporated in clause 2(2)(a), when clause (2)(2)(c) states:

“to promote, and co-ordinate the planning of, the effective provision of schools, educational services and youth services;”

is causing the Youth Service some concern. It believes, and we believe, that the Youth Service is set firmly in education of which it is an integral part. Rather than separate it out into clause 2(2)(b), youth services should be incorporated into clause 2(2)(a). That would firmly set youth services in the educational context.

Secondly, there is the opportunity lost. Clause 37 sets out clearly the powers of the Department to carry out inspections of educational establishments. The Education and Training Inspectorate perceives itself to be independent. However, the Bill could have legislated for the independence of the inspectorate because there is a potential conflict of interest as the inspectorate would be involved in the setting of policy and also in monitoring, inspecting, reviewing and reporting on that policy. An opportunity has been lost to establish in law the independence of the inspectorate in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Topping:** Finally, we move to clauses 30 to 36, which deal with schemes and management for grant-aided schools, and Gregory Butler from the Southern Education and Library Board will deal with that issue.

**Mr Gregory Butler (South Eastern Education and Library Board):** I will cover three main issues. The first relates to the timing and the establishment of schemes of management. There is an area of possible confusion when boards of governors, after 1 January 2010, operate under the existing scheme. To avoid that,

we request that model schemes of management be in place at that date.

Clause 34 deals with proposals to place duties on boards of governors in relation to achievement of high standards of educational attainment. That is a significant change. Paragraph 7.2 of ‘Every School a Good School’ states:

“Governors have a particularly important role to play by supporting and encouraging staff while at the same time taking on the role of a critical friend and encouraging the school in its quest for continuous improvement.”

It is important that that responsibility be set out clearly in a scheme of management.

The third area relates to community governors, which is in clause 35. Community governors are defined as persons living or working in the local community. Our concern is that that could be described as being suitably vague — or just vague. That description is an issue. There is also no indication about how governors are appointed, and that is a concern.

**Mr Topping:** Those are the major issues that the Bill throws up for us. There are many other technical issues; for example, unless one reads the previous legislation and ties it together with the current legislation, it is very difficult to interpret exactly what is intended. Another issue is that the Bill is, in many places, enabling legislation: it enables things to happen. However, it is difficult for us to interpret the minds of the authors regarding what they intend to happen following the approval of the Bill.

We have tried to portray in our presentation that, first, we support the creation of a regional authority. Secondly, we have listed our areas of concern in the Bill, including the single employing authority, the support and role of the ESA, youth services, and, finally, governance of the service.

Thank you for listening to our presentation.

**The Chairperson:** It is right and proper to pay tribute to the boards. One of the chief executives, Mrs McClenaghan, cannot be with us today because she retired yesterday. Gregory Butler is here today to represent the Southern Education and Library Board, but we wish Mrs McClenaghan the very best in her retirement.

It is also right and proper that we place on record our appreciation of the huge amount of work that the boards have done. As MLAs, we have all had the opportunity to interact with you, to challenge you, and to have various exchanges with you over the years. However, you have carried a huge responsibility, and it would be remiss of me, as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, not to place on record our appreciation and thanks.

We welcome this opportunity to discuss the fundamental sea change in the governance arrangements of education for Northern Ireland; they will have huge implications for many years to come.

We will try to work within the remit that you have given us. In your presentations, you dealt specifically with the functions and general duty of the single employing authority. We will work our way through those issues so that we do not go from Dan to Beersheba, which is, at times, how we operate. However, that should in no way preclude any member from raising any issue.

There may be a typing error under “functions and general duty” because it says section 2, whereas it should be clause 2(1). In your submission, you said that there is a danger that the nature of the statutory function ascribed to the ESA will limit its ability to deliver effective service. How do you see that being rolled out in practice if and when the ESA comes into existence?

**Mr Topping:** Thank you for your kind words about our work over the past 36 years; we very much appreciate them, and we will convey them to our staff and members.

One of our reasons for supporting a regional educational authority was that we know some of the problems that we faced in managing the service over the past 36 years. One of the major problems that we faced was planning — the planning of school provision in particular — the rationalisation of schools, supporting schools through resourcing them, or ensuring that new schools were built in the right place at the right time. We recognised all those problems.

When the proposal was made, we said that the new authority should have a clearly defined role in statute that would allow it to plan for school provision. Clause 2 states that ESA will “co-ordinate”. That is our role, and we know the problems that we face in co-ordinating with various other sectors that have responsibility for schools provision. It is very difficult.

We would like to see the responsibility laid on the ESA to plan effectively for the service in an all-inclusive authority. Schedule 7 proposes an amendment to article 14 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, which reiterates the co-ordinating role of the ESA rather than its responsibility to ensure that the schools estate is planned effectively. That is one of the issues that we wish to highlight.

**The Chairperson:** Would changing that not merely reduce the number of education and library boards without radically changing the function of an organisation to deliver the intended aim: raising standards?

**Mr Topping:** That is a good question. There is a danger that all the Bill will do is get rid of five boards

and one or two other bodies. Reading between the lines, and taking into account some of the discussions that we have had, leads us to conclude that the intention is not to get rid of five boards and a few other bodies but to reform the service radically in order to create efficiencies and to put school improvement as the key element on the agenda.

We support that; however, we have reservations about how it might be achieved and the legal basis underpinning it. We welcome the ESA’s intervention role; but, as one of my colleagues said, we feel that that intervention should be strengthened by legislation

**The Chairperson:** David Cargo made what I thought was a worrying comment to the effect that the ESA makes the board of governors one of its sub-committees.

We are told that boards of governors will have control and new responsibilities, and Mr Butler mentioned the reconstitution of board of governors, but how do boards of governors feel about being sub-committees of a very centralised, bureaucratic organisation that holds all the control and power?

**Mr Cargo:** We have tried to highlight the fudge at the heart of the Bill. When we were first engaged in discussions on the Bill, there was a possibility that each of the boards would speak to its own vested interests and say that it is important that it stayed in Belfast, Ballymena, Armagh or wherever.

We chose not to do that, and we engaged fully with the Department and the then Minister. We asked them to build something better than we had, which had the potential to become fragmented. There has been a fudge in the education system between, apparently, giving boards of governors more power — leading to fragmentation of the system — or centralising the service around the Minister and the Department, which would lead to greater coherence.

We were looking for clarity in the Bill about the direction in which we were heading, but we believe that the Bill has ducked the core issue. Certain consequences flow from being an employer that must be clearly identified in the Bill. There is potential for those to be included in the Bill, but the heading of the clauses relating to employment and the ESA refers to it as an “employing authority”. That has been part of the problem over the past 20 years in our dealings with boards of governors on employment issues. Boards of governors often claim that they are the employer and that the education and library board is only the employing authority; however, we have never been able to get legal clarity about the difference, and we were looking forward to that being provided by the Bill.

If the ESA is to be the single authority, it would be the employer, and boards of governors would become its subcommittees; however, if that is not the direction

in which the Committee or the Minister want to go, the Bill must make it clear whether alternative arrangements are available. At present, the Bill is neither one nor the other, and it replicates the difficult situation in which education and library boards have to fund legal cases — when they are settled — on behalf of the maintained sector. However, we have no role in trying to moderate or to play an intervening role in ensuring that best practice is followed. That is no criticism of the CCMS; it is a reality of the present fudged system.

For the first time in a generation, we have a Northern Ireland Bill for Northern Ireland's system rather than a pick-and-mix Bill from England that we would have to adapt. We hoped that the Bill would have clarified those issues and provided clear policy directions.

**The Chairperson:** Woolworth's has closed down, so we thought we had done away with the days of pick-and-mix; perhaps that is not the case.

From what Mr Cargo said, even with the system that we have had for 36 years, there has been no real clarity about employers and employing authorities. It seems that we are heading into the abyss. The Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education and the GBA say that they want to be employers. Mr Cargo talked about the ESA being the single employing authority and expressed the concerns of education and library boards about how it would operate under the draft legislation.

The Committee should take legal advice on the employers' status vis-à-vis the ESA and boards of governors, because the more we delve into this and ask questions, the more confused I become. I just do not know sometimes where it is all going, and there seems to be no clarity. The issues are shrouded in mist.

The education and library boards have had to administer all that for the past 36 years, and all we would be doing is transferring that responsibility to Gavin Boyd and the ESA. If, however, that arrangement were to be challenged, we would have a problem. Then we would see who would pick up the legal fees and the fall-out as a result. Is that a fair comment?

**Mr Topping:** We are saying two things. First, if we are to have a regional education authority, it makes sense to have a regional employing authority or a regional employer. That is logical. If we do that, however, we must have clarity about the relationship between that authority and the boards of governors on employment terms.

**The Chairperson:** I will now open the discussion to members. There is so much that we have to cover, and I want to give as much time to this important issue as possible.

**Mr Elliott:** Thank you very much, gentlemen. The Chairperson is right that there is so much to go through. David raised the issue surrounding the employment authority, and that is not the first time that that point has been raised with the Committee. Indeed, as has been said, it seems to be getting even more confusing.

The Chairperson's expression of thanks for all the work that the boards have done over the years sounded almost like a swansong. I do not want it to sound as though this is the last time that we will hear from the boards or lobby them.

**The Chairperson:** No; it will not be the last time that we write to them. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Elliott:** There is clearly a lot of work to be done before the ESA comes in, if, indeed, it ever does; I put down that marker, given the way things are going and what the Committee has heard. How are the boards going at the moment? I understand, from talking to staff, that boards have some concerns about their future. The boards thought that they were planning to move on fairly soon, but that has not happened.

Gordon, you said that you find it difficult to interpret what is in the minds of the authors of the Bill. The authors of the Bill sit at the end of this table every week, and we cannot interpret what is in their minds either. It would be much easier if we could, but we cannot. Those people are sitting behind you, and we will hear from them later.

Let me be blunt; we keep being told that it is not the Bill's intention to do this or it is the Bill's intention to do that. However, legal people tell us that we can deal only with what we see in front of us — if something is in the Bill, it is in the Bill; if it is not, it is not. The difficulty is that we cannot go on impressions or what we believe the situation should be.

I do not know whether you can help me on this, but one point that has not been touched on is the huge financial savings that we are told will be generated by the move from five boards to the ESA. I am concerned that some autonomy will be lost. No disrespect to David or Gordon, but it is often rural communities — and the Southern Board and, particularly, the Western Board — that lose out when things are moved to one central body. Do you think that real savings will be made, and, if so, where do you see them being made; in administration, perhaps?

Has there been any discussion of how the transfer of staff from the boards to the ESA will evolve?

**Mr Topping:** Mr Elliott has asked three questions. Each situation is different, so would you like us to give a brief round-robin update of the state of play in each of the boards?

**The Chairperson:** Yes, but I would like something to be clarified before we move on. Gordon, am I right

in saying that the existing boards could not be reconstituted if the ESA is not introduced as of 1 January 2010? The life of the boards has already been extended by six months, and departmental officials have told the Committee that the intention is that the ESA will come into effect on 1 January 2010 but that it may be 1 April 2010. There may be legal issues around that.

**Mr Topping:** We have asked that question, but we have not been given a specific answer. I know that my chairman asked that question of the Minister at the last meeting of the chairs of the boards.

**The Chairperson:** We could perhaps ask the Department that question.

**Mr Topping:** You might want to do that. However, you are right that the life of the boards has been extended by six months until the end of December.

Would you like us to start that quick round-robin update?

**The Chairperson:** Yes, that would be very helpful.

**Mr Mulholland:** We are working in a very challenging environment, but I would not describe it as a crisis; our service delivery is nowhere near crisis level. The main difficulty that the Western Board is experiencing relates to the vacancy-control policy and the fact that it has been operating since late 2006. We are bringing in arrangements to replace staff who are moving out of the service with new temporary staff or staff who are acting up. The staff have responded extremely well, and we continue to deliver our services at the highest level possible.

One of the concerns for staff in the west is the Belfast-centric nature of jobs that are being advertised in the ESAIT. Up until yesterday, all the ESAIT jobs were based in Belfast. The ESAIT has tried to arrange for staff to work remotely for one day a week or so, but that still requires post holders from the west to spend an hour and a half travelling to and from Belfast in order to get to work. That leaves them feeling disadvantaged and that they are unable to apply for jobs in ESAIT, the organisation that is starting to form the new ESA, which will, therefore, leave them disadvantaged in the future. However, Western Board staff are certainly rising to the challenge, and they are continuing to deliver services.

**Mr Sloan:** Chairperson, you commended us for the work that we have done. I am sure that my colleagues will want to join me in commending our staff for the outstanding work that they have done in extremely challenging and difficult circumstances.

However, the South Eastern Board would present a slightly different picture, because we are close not only to the ESAIT's headquarters, but also to those of NILA. NILA has its own administrative staff, and, from today, is a free-standing authority.

The South Eastern Board is still rising to the challenge, but I must tell the Committee that there is a human cost. Fewer people are doing more work, and I see what that costs. Staff are doing that work well and they step up to the mark day after day, but I fear that, in years to come, we will all be held to account for the human cost.

Vacancy control is a major factor. We can, of course, replace staff, but we cannot replace their skills. When staff go, we bring in agency or temporary staff who require two, three or four months of training, particularly in areas such as finance and human resources. That presents a challenge, and that is when other staff step up to the mark. However, our board has lost something — more than 40% of our staff are now on temporary contracts of one form or another. Some are agency staff, while others are acting up to higher posts — sometimes they act up, and then move up again and again.

That is also an issue because if people are acting up to two or three levels above their current grade, I understand that, under The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE), when they move to the ESA they will revert to their substantive grade. That touches on another question that Mr Elliott asked. Some of those staff have been doing jobs two grades up for the past two or three years, and they have clearly developed expertise. They are moving out of the education sector because they have worked at that higher level and are attracted to substantive posts in some other authority.

There are challenges, but, like Barry said, we are not in crisis. However, I am concerned about the well-being of staff.

**Mr Topping:** Gregory will describe the situation in the Southern Board.

**Mr G Butler:** Not unsurprisingly, our situation is quite similar to the situation in the west. A vacancy-control policy is in place and has had an impact, but because many of the jobs are based in Belfast or the greater Belfast area, we have not experienced the same loss of staff as the South Eastern Board or the Belfast Board. Therefore, the impact of vacancy control is a particular issue.

Our board is also in the fortunate position of being in an area that has a rising population, and it will continue to rise considerably over the next few years. That means that our budget is very good, which affords us some flexibility that other boards may not have because the populations that they serve are declining.

For senior staff in the board such as myself, travelling is not an issue, but it is an issue for administrative staff whose families live in the area and who would have difficulty meeting the cost of any move. Therefore, travel and the future location of jobs are particular

concerns for staff in our board. As it develops, the ESA must ensure that those people who have given very good service for the past 20 or 30 years are not disadvantaged by the relocation of jobs away from their area.

There is a positive aspect in that our board is operating very well at present. We have a number of acting-up posts, but the overall position is very good. However, there is a major concern about the long-term position, and, from a morale point of view, that is sometimes a very difficult issue.

I thank the Chairperson for his comments about Helen McClenaghan. I will pass them on to her when I see her next week. We bid her farewell yesterday. She did a lot in the board, but she has left a very solid ship, and Tony Murphy will take that forward and we will continue to progress.

**Mr Cargo:** Belfast is, I suppose, used to providing services in challenging circumstances. We did it for 30 years during a period of quite difficult conflict in the city. In more recent years, we have had our challenges, and we have continued to meet them. So, the services continue to run. There is no service diminution.

I echo my colleagues' comments about vacancy control, and I will highlight two issues. Very often those caught in the vacancy-control arrangements are young staff who are, perhaps, starting out on careers and attempting, in even the current difficult circumstances, to get rented property or to get on the mortgage ladder. However, because they are temporary — albeit temporary in permanent positions, because we do not see those posts going anywhere, even under the ESA — they are unable to access some of those services, and that is a particular difficulty for young people in the current situation.

The second issue is certainly a concern for us in Belfast. We have just transferred 1,000 staff among the five boards to NILA. We know the amount of work that that has required, which is in addition to everyone's duties. We have 50,000 staff to transfer to the ESA in a very short time. With the volume of work associated with that, I think that it will be extremely challenging to continue to run the existing high-quality services and provide for the transfer of assets, staff and everything else to a new organisation in a very short period of time.

**Mr Topping:** From our point of view, there are two issues. The first is that uncertainty creates morale issues, and, unfortunately, for three years now there has been uncertainty. So, our message would be: it is important to get it right, but it is important to create certainty in the system. Secondly, like the other boards, 30% of our staff are in temporary positions. That is not sustainable in the longer term.

If I may pick up on the other two questions. First, an outline business case, which the Committee has probably seen, demonstrates savings of, I believe, £20 million in the third year. We have no reason to dispute those figures. It is obvious that, when organisations are brought together, the number of people managing that service will be automatically reduced. For example, if there are five of us and only one is needed in the longer term, there are obvious savings.

However, I would guess that the main savings will be made after the creation of the ESA, because, at that stage, services will be reorganised, and, again, that will bring management savings. That creates all kinds of challenging issues that need to be addressed and managed. However, we would certainly concur that there will be financial savings because of the way in which the system moves.

With regard to staff transfer, if the ESA is formed and created in exactly the same way as the Library Authority, I would have to say that, up to this point, that was done very smoothly, and staff were very satisfied about the way in which they were consulted and dealt with. However, the ESA throws up issues that the Library Authority perhaps does not.

Gregory mentioned the major issue, which is location. One must remember that 70% of our staff are women, so there is a gender issue in all of this. They are working where they are working because their families are close by. I think that centralising services, as distinct from regionalising them, will cause some problems, and will, I would guess, require significant discussion and negotiation with staff.

Those are the types of issues that Mr Elliott's questions throw up.

**Mr Cargo:** I would like to reinforce the issue that we highlighted in the initial presentation, which concerns equality. Because of section 75, we are in a different situation as regards how staff are transferred than we perhaps would have been in the past. We are concerned that, because certain processes were used in the past for certain types of staff — for example, civil servants who were seconded into a new organisation — people will say that that should continue because that is the way it has always been done. If we are moving to create a new organisation, every member of staff needs to be placed on the same footing.

There is a precedent within the education and library boards. In 1997, we transferred staff to further education, where there was a number of posts in our central headquarters. We could have operated a secondment arrangement because the board was not going away. We trawled those jobs in advance so that people were defined as transferring on a particular date to the new organisation. We would emphasise that it is important that no group of staff anywhere feels either

advantaged or disadvantaged by the arrangements. We fear that, at the moment, that approach is not being taken. Therefore, the sound basis of equality for staff transfer will be diminished.

**Mr Topping:** The recruitment, retention and voluntary severance (RRVS) paper, which is currently out for consultation, is pertinent to the discussion. I am sure that you are aware of it. Staff are very concerned about that, mainly because of the reasons that David has outlined and also because the criteria that are being used in that paper to allow staff to apply for jobs in the second tier, and probably the third tier, are such that they exclude staff from applying, rather than include them. We have made the case that any recruitment procedure should be inclusive, rather than exclusive.

**The Chairperson:** We will ask the departmental officials to comment on that when they appear before the Committee later.

**Mr Elliott:** Savings from middle management are estimated at 25%. Is that reasonable and practical in real terms, especially considering the inflation costs of wages? That will probably mean a reduction in staff of around a third.

**Mr Topping:** I do not think that we can answer that, because it depends on how the organisation takes forward its structure.

**Mr Cargo:** As Stanton pointed out at the beginning, although the current funding arrangement includes around 60% of funding that goes directly to schools, many of the other services that we provide, such as the psychology service, educational welfare, transport service and school meals, are provided directly to schools — those are all provided directly to children.

The budget of each board's headquarters is £5 million, so £25 million will be saved from the headquarters alone. In the first instance, any transition will include those savings. As Gordon said, although we have no reason to dispute the business case because it has been set out by the ESA and by the Department, as we see it at the moment, and given that not much redesign of services is proposed in advance of the establishment of the ESA, most of the burden will fall on the headquarters' services. In total, that is a figure of £25 million.

**The Chairperson:** What has been the interaction and interplay between the ESA, in its current form as an interim arrangement, and you as working chief executives who are responsible for your boards? Are you happy that the ESA, in its current form, has taken a hands-on approach and that you have a working knowledge and understanding of what is happening?

The transition from the library boards to a single service seemed to go reasonably well, and I suspect that you had a close working relationship with those involved in that transition. Is that being replicated with

the transition to the ESA, or do you feel as though, as Tom said, there is a swansong and that the ESA, in its current form, may say that the boards will not be in existence from a certain date and that, therefore, any advice that you might give is of little relevance?

**Mr Topping:** Different Departments do things in different ways, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has certainly worked in a different way from the Department of Education. The five of us who are present today all sit on a transition board with the Department and the ESAIT, and we have contributed to those discussions. As well as that, all the staff who have been involved in working groups and various kinds of planning groups have said that they appreciated the communication that has gone on.

However, the expertise that we have has perhaps not been fully utilised. We have seconded staff to the ESAIT; for example, as you know, my chief finance officer has been seconded, and other boards have also contributed in that way. When it comes to the main business of the ESA, which is the educational function, I think that there will be a demand on our staff to provide expertise and advice — I hope that we can meet that demand.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I have read the Bill on several occasions, and I do not see it stated anywhere in it that the headquarters of the ESA will be in Belfast. That is one area of concern that can perhaps be clarified today. It does not state in the Bill where the headquarters will be, and, given recent reports about decentralisation from Belfast, I might conclude that it will not be in Belfast.

I understand that there is a need for careful liaison between staff representatives, the Department and the ESA to ensure that there is consultation with staff on transfer, etc. As we have seen in other major developments — *[Interruption.]*

I am sorry, Chairman, I can not hear a word that I am saying.

**The Chairperson:** Could we have silence, please?

**Mr O'Dowd:** We have seen with the transfer of staff in the Health Service that that can be managed, but it must be managed carefully.

David, I will not quote you directly, but you said that there was a possibility that boards of governors would become subcommittees of the ESA. Would that be a bad thing or a good thing?

**Mr Cargo:** I hope that John was not precluding Belfast from the discussions on the implementation of the recommendations of the Bain Report on the relocation of public sector jobs, or precluding a fair equality assessment.

**Mr O'Dowd:** There speaks a Belfast man.

**Mr Cargo:** I got the impression that anywhere but Belfast seemed to be the conclusion. My staff would be gravely concerned if that were the case, as would the board members.

**Mr Topping:** On the other hand, at least four of us here support you on that. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Cargo:** Unfortunately, that has been part of the problem over the past number of years, in relation to funding and all sorts of things. What I was trying to point out was that there is a logic to the current single authority having employing functions. It is logical that there should be an employer.

Before 1989, boards of governors were originally management committees of the board. The 1989 Order changed that function, because it established local management of schools. In our view, when establishing that, the Order did not clarify the relationship between boards of governors, the employers and the employing authorities. We had hoped that the Bill would clarify that.

It is not for me to comment on whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. In our opinion, at the moment, the Bill continues the fudge that was evident in what was not a particularly good piece of legislation — the 1989 Order. We saw the Bill as an opportunity to clarify that, and to get a clear policy direction on how the service would go forward. We see logic in having a single employing authority, and that has obvious consequences for governors. We accept that not everyone favours that direction, but the Bill needs to provide clarity so that it does not perpetuate what, in our opinion, is a very inefficient fudge in the current legislation.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I want to tease the matter out. Are you referring specifically to the employment role rather than the day-to-day running of the schools? Is that the focus of your concern?

**Mr Cargo:** Yes; one part of the Bill seems to infer that boards of governors would operate under the direction of the ESA, whereas other parts seem to infer that boards of governors would have maximum supported autonomy, which was one of the original concepts. We feel that the Bill, in its current format, does not clarify that matter sufficiently but, in fact, perpetuates a fudge that was created by the 1989 Order and that was not helpful in the situation. That needs to be clarified.

It is a political decision as to whether to select autonomy and, therefore, potentially greater fragmentation, or to select cohesion and, therefore, potentially greater centralisation. The Bill must clarify that position before it becomes law. If it does not, you will end up in the situation in which we found ourselves whereby the position is not clear. Moreover, the issue is further compounded by the fact that the 1989 Order says that we can go into schools only by invitation. It is testimony to the skills of our officers

that we have never been refused entry to a school. However, the Bill must clarify those issues and outline clearly the direction that the political system wants education to take.

**The Chairperson:** The Committee is at a stage where it is focusing on particular clauses. Clause 8 says that the ESA cannot lawfully refuse to put into effect any proper decision of a board of governors on employment matters. Do you think that a model employment scheme and guidance, an independent appeals system or some regulation and control built into the Assembly and the institutions here would be sufficient to address the issues of concern? The Committee has asked that question of the CCMS, the Catholic bishops and the GBA. At this stage, we still do not know who would represent a school legally in the High Court in the event of a dispute.

**Mr Cargo:** I have no legal competence. As Gordon said, part of the problem is that the Bill must be read in conjunction with other legislation. Other legislation provides the Department with powers to intervene. For example, article 158 of the 1989 Order currently allows it to intervene. That is why we mentioned a lost opportunity. We had an opportunity to create an education Bill that combined all the system's powers, responsibilities and entitlements. I do not have an opinion on whether that would sort out the situation.

**The Chairperson:** How different is article 158 to article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986?

**Mr Topping:** It is much more wide-ranging.

**The Chairperson:** That is new to the Committee. Part of the problem is that there are 11 other pieces of subordinate legislation. It is like an onion; one continually peels, and people's eyes water every time it is brought into the room. Article 158 is another of the Department's current powers.

**Mr Topping:** I think that article 158 is the amendment to article 101. The Department could, perhaps, clarify that matter.

**The Chairperson:** Are you saying that article 158 and article 101 might be the same?

**Mr Cargo:** Article 158 contains greater powers than article 101.

**Mr Topping:** The answer to many of the questions being asked is that it depends on what type of education system one wants. It is a choice between a service that is totally delegated with autonomy in schools or one that is centrally controlled. That is a decision that the Committee and the Minister must make.

**The Chairperson:** As practitioners who came through some 30 years of difficulties and challenges, what type of service do you think is best for education? Please

remove us politicians from the equation, as people are fed up with our meddling and interference. I realise that opinions may differ, but it would be valuable to hear if you feel that one is preferable to or has advantages over another.

**Mr Cargo:** I have 36 years' experience in the education service, 25 years of which have been served in education and library boards. I may be straying into the area of vested interests, but one of the strengths of the board system — which I have seen in Belfast and in other areas over the years, and during very difficult and challenging times — is that all interests are represented in one room. Therefore, if an issue comes to the floor of the board, vested interests cannot rule supreme, and there is a moderating influence on all the various sectors.

We felt that one of the reasons for moving to a single authority was that all the vested interests would be represented under it and nowhere else. However, the Bill appears to give vested interests — and I use that in the best sense of the word — separate bodies to represent them. Therefore the cohesion that we have valued in the system appears to be in danger of fragmenting. My fear, as I approach the end of my career in education, is that we will end up with a more fragmented system with less opportunity to drive standards up.

**Mr Topping:** I agree with that, but I would go a little further. Some people have called me a control freak, which is, of course, completely wrong —

**The Chairperson:** Gordon, I could never call you that —

**Mr Topping:** I support delegation to schools because decision making should be given to those who must pay the consequences. The present system is a mix-and-match: some responsibility is delegated and some is not. Therein lies the difficulty, because some of those who make decisions do not have to pay for the consequences of those decisions.

We had hoped, in line with the concept of maximum supported autonomy — or accountable autonomy as it now is — that functions would be delegated to schools allowing them to make decisions and be accountable and responsible for them. The role of the ESA in monitoring and co-ordinating that will be very important and it must ensure that those schools are held accountable for whatever they achieve. I do not know whether anyone else would agree or disagree.

**Mr Sloan:** To put it in a nutshell, of the £250 million budget that the South Eastern Education and Library Board receives, £160 million is delegated to schools under local management of schools. We are held accountable for the whole budget, yet we have no control over £160 million of it. I agree with Gordon: if

you are going to delegate, the money and the accountability must also be delegated.

The other issue relates to what boards actually do, although I do not know whether my colleagues will agree with me on that. I am a firm believer that form should follow function. The purpose of boards is to raise educational standards; if we get that right, the structure can be designed around it.

It is still a cause of great personal regret that there are no educationalists on the implementation team to drive educational policy. That policy should be driving the structures that are to be put in place and what is, or is not, delegated.

**Mr Mulholland:** I agree. There are concerns about the potential for fragmentation in the service. With regard to accountable autonomy, the ESA's role in monitoring what is going on must be matched by a power to intervene when it sees something inappropriate that impacts on standards.

**Mr G Butler:** Considering the situation pre-1989, there was an issue concerning the need to build the capacity of boards of governors. Although there may be a large capacity in certain areas — and the strong will survive and the weak will go to the wall — in some rural areas there are problems with developing supported autonomy and getting the right people to implement it. There is a difference between fragmentation and centrality, and that is not an easy circle to square.

Over the past 30 years, support from the boards has been indispensable in making the system work; the degree of hand-holding that goes on to stop people going over the precipice cannot be underestimated. Support services have helped. A balance must be struck between providing support and capacity building, which is not a cheap option. In order to develop the skills of governors and of boards of governors, one must invest in people at grass roots. At the same time, one must develop a central vision for education that everyone can share. That is not a cheap or an easy balance to strike.

**The Chairperson:** Other members will probably raise this matter, but I wish to put it on the table before inviting questions from them. As chief executives of the boards, you have had the primary responsibility for the controlled sector. It is a huge issue, so I want to spend some time on it. Speaking as a member of the DUP, not as the Chairperson of the Committee, the controlled sector is important to us, and the proposals for it present a huge problem that must be satisfactorily resolved.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I welcome the witnesses, and I associate myself with the Chairperson's remarks about the work of the boards. For many years, I served on the Western Education and Library Board, so I know that it has always done excellent work and stood by schools,

all of which, maintained and controlled, will miss its services.

I too have grave concerns, which I have raised in the Committee, about the situation of governors. I am deeply concerned about getting current governors to return. Schools cannot operate without their boards of governors.

I am concerned too that responsibility for youth services will remain with the Department of Education. They should not become a separate matter; they should remain attached. Gordon, are you confident that the ESA, as it is proposed, can deliver the enhanced services?

**Mr Topping:** That is a difficult question, because we do not know exactly what the ESA will look like; the process is evolving. Although we support the establishment of a regional education authority, we know the flaws in the system; we have worked that flawed system for 36 years. Whatever the ESA may look like, we hope that it is better than what we have now.

We have highlighted some of our concerns about aspects of the Bill, and we hope that they can be amended. However, we do not know whether they can be changed, because all kinds of interests are at play. Nevertheless, once all those matters have been resolved and consensus has been reached, we hope that the structure and organisation of the ESA will be better than what we have now.

**Mr Lunn:** I share Mary's concerns about the ability of schools to attract governors in future, not because of the rules of employment but because of the more onerous duties that they will have to undertake and the training and, perhaps, qualifications that they will need. Put simply, boards of governors may be sued without being able to rely on the ESA to pick up the bill.

I hesitate to cross swords with 150 years' experience.

**Mr Topping:** That is only what it looks like.

**Mr Lunn:** I pitched it low.

**Mr Elliott:** Which of the witnesses did you mean?  
[Laughter.]

**Mr Lunn:** The heading of clause 3:

"ESA to employ all staff of grant-aided schools",

is the only reference that I can see to the ESA being the single employing authority. I know that you have done your best to explain it to me, but try again. What is the difference between an employing authority and an employer? Given that the ESA will undertake both those roles, how could it not be liable for the bill for a successful action that a teacher took against a school? How could the bill be delegated to the board of governors?

**Mr Topping:** There are two questions there. One relates to the recruitment and expertise of governors, and Mr Sloan will deal with that. The other question is about employing authority versus employer, and Mr Cargo will deal with that. I look forward to hearing the answers. [Laughter.]

**Mr Sloan:** We have 80 years' experience. I want to place on record the commitment of unpaid governors. I have met and worked with many governors, and their commitment and support to staff, principals and pupils is immeasurable. I am sure that you all agree.

Many governors are aware that the ESA is being introduced and of potential changes. We are beginning the process of recruiting again, and we are writing to bodies; however, it is difficult to be precise about what the response will be. I have been to 10 to 15 schools in the past weeks, and governors raised concerns about where they will stand in relation to a single authority and what support will be given to them. Governors want to know whether they will need someone with an accountancy or legal background on their board, for example. A great deal will be lost if boards of governors become less caring and more mechanistic.

Clarification on the recruitment and expertise of boards of governors goes back to the employing authority and the employer role and what they will pick up. At present, education and library boards indemnify boards of governors. I love the phrase "cavalierly disregard", although it is not used in legislation now. Provided that boards of governors did not "cavalierly disregard" the rules, the education and library boards would support them. That needs clarification.

**Mr Cargo:** Since 1989, we have been asking for clarification on the differences between employer and employing authority, but it is difficult to get legal clarification. There is, perhaps, a slight misunderstanding. The problem with liability goes with who holds the contracts of employment. With regard to managing risk and liabilities in the current system, one always tries to minimise the possibility of having to pay out large sums of money for the sins of the boards of governors or individual members of a board.

In certain sectors, education and library boards are liable for paying out the money, but we cannot intervene to ensure the highest standards of practice.

**Mr Lunn:** I got that earlier.

**Mr Cargo:** We were hoping that the Bill would remove the confusion and that, as single authority, the ESA would be the single employer. Therefore the nuances and confusion of the present legislation would be clarified and boards of governors would be in a new relationship with the single body. It would be as it was pre-1989, and the boards of governors would, in fact, become sub-committees of the ESA. The authority would not only have the liability — and that would be

clear — but it would have responsibility to ensure that the highest standards of best practice were employed in all boards of governors.

In certain circumstances that may appear draconian; however, it is a logical follow-on from a single authority. If that is not the political will, then you are moving onto the issue, as Stanton said, of the importance of boards of governors.

It is important that we seriously question the composition of boards of governors before the Bill is enacted. Important though boards of governors are, we are putting almost £1 billion of public money into the hands of volunteers. Those volunteers have many strengths, but if we are to give them greater responsibilities, there are issues around the composition of boards. Where autonomy is allied with accountability, that needs to be clearly thought through before a Bill is enacted under which it will be OK to heap more on volunteers. Although those volunteers invest innumerable hours in the system, there may not be — or, as Gregory says, in certain rural areas there may never be — the quality of governors required to do what the system wants them to do.

**Mr Lunn:** Can I take it from that that you do not have a problem with the liability question? Does the Bill make it clear who would accept liability?

**Mr Cargo:** It appears to be clear by default. In such a situation, I assume that people would co-join the board of governors and the ESA. Therefore, in certain situations as a last resort, the ESA, as the public body, would pay. We should be more proactive and give the employing body responsibility and accountability for ensuring the highest standards of practice. That would minimise liability in certain situations, which cannot be done at the moment.

**Mrs M Bradley:** Will there be a weakness in the system if we wait until all the changes come in and then try to bring in new governors? Should we not have new governors applying now to be trained and brought up to the required standard? I have a feeling that many of the governors already in place in schools have served for several years and do not want to serve again. What happens if a school cannot get enough people at that late stage?

**Mr Topping:** That is exactly what we are trying to do: we are trying to widen the expertise and we are alerting potential governors to the fact that the role is very wide and will become wider. For example, when we write to nominating bodies, which we have to do under present legislation, we alert them to the sort of expertise that might be valuable on a governing body. That does not necessarily mean that we will get everybody we would like on all governing bodies. That is part of the issue that you raised and part of the issue that we have to face. It comes back, I think, to the

point that David made: how do we ensure that those people are well trained and up to speed with what is going on? That is a massive task because there are thousands of governors.

**The Chairperson:** The Northern Board in particular is concerned that the schemes of management are not fit for purpose. That is why it would be helpful if we could see what was proposed as an off-the-shelf scheme of management for the ESA; at present, we do not know if that even exists. That is something that perhaps we should ask the ESA.

**Mr Topping:** That is the timing issue that Gregory mentioned.

**Mr Mulholland:** One school might use an off-the-shelf scheme of management and another devise its own. The same governor could serve on the boards of two schools that operated two different schemes of management.

**Mr Lunn:** I ask everyone this question, but I have been waiting for you guys to come along because I am interested in your view. Members are sniggering because they know what I am going to say. You have the experience of operating boards that are composed in a particular way. Is it desirable for the ESA to be composed of a governing body dominated by local councillors?

**The Chairperson:** When is your next board of governors meeting, Gordon?

**Mr Topping:** I do not know why I sat in the middle. *[Laughter.]* We have councillors on our boards at the moment. As the Committee knows, 40% of our boards consist of elected representatives. I think that David said that we support the composition of our boards 100% because they contain all the stakeholders in different proportions.

Over the time that I have been involved, party politics has come to the fore only very rarely; what does come to the fore is community politics, and interesting alliances have formed to tackle problems. I hope that that could be the model for the ESA. Stakeholders should be around the table so that they can influence things and work together in the spirit of partnership for the benefit of all the young people that they serve.

**Mr Lunn:** The difference is between 40% and a majority of one.

**Mr Topping:** I appreciate that, but I do not think that the principle changes.

**Mr Cargo:** I concur with that view. The balances are less important than the fact that all the interests feel that they have a representative voice in the decision-making body. It may be fashionable to think of smaller boards, and those could work in certain circumstances;

however, we said from the outset that the education and skills authority is a regional service locally delivered. The local dimension in education is crucial in driving up standards and sustaining communities across the region.

It must be ensured that the people who serve centrally can also bring a sub-regional dimension into discussions. When I came to Belfast, I thought that there would be cohesion, but Belfast is made up of a series of urban villages. We have strength in relation to our decision making because different political parties are represented and we have people from different parts of the city. We also have stakeholders of the main Churches that represent the various parts of the city. Furthermore, there is a microcosm of the users of the service who come from right across the city. That strengthens the decision-making process.

**Mr Lunn:** There will be a bigger number and a smaller area. At present, the ESA will represent the whole of Northern Ireland with a maximum of 12 members — seven of whom will be local councillors. Where is the scope for other interests in those other five people, who, presumably, include the chairman?

**Mr Cargo:** Twelve is rather small for the range of responsibilities and the amount of money and assets with which the ESA will deal.

**Mr Lunn:** You do not seem to have a problem with the fact that there is a majority of local councillors; you are a major disappointment to me. *[Laughter.]* I will have to go back to the bishops. *[Laughter.]*

**Miss McIlveen:** My questions are on two areas. The first, primarily, is directed to Gordon. Being a control freak is no bad thing — it is a positive trait that I sometimes see in myself.

**Mr B McCrea:** What a good job Hansard does. That will be used on countless occasions.

**Miss McIlveen:** In reference to clause 13, you mention receiving Charter Mark status for a curriculum advisory and support service and for innovative models of delivery. It is right that you should be proud of that. The question is in and around best practice and the lack of a comparator — for want of a better word — for the ESA. How can best practice be delivered?

**Mr Topping:** Charter Mark is a quality award that is based on customers and the service and delivery that they receive. We have tried to ensure that our service achieves maximum customer satisfaction, and we have systems and procedures that are externally assessed to demonstrate that.

It is important that single organisations develop a culture of continuous improvement. To do that, one needs to benchmark one's service against where one started from so that, each year, one improves on pupil outcomes, customer satisfaction or any other measure.

It is also important to benchmark one's service against others. For example, the education service is trying to benchmark itself against the best in the world through the programme for international student assessment (PISA) results. I do not see any reason why the ESA should not look at other countries and services to ensure that the service that it delivers is at least of the same quality as elsewhere. The same principles of customer orientation and continuous improvement apply whether there is a single body or five or more bodies in a region — it is important to demonstrate year-on-year improvement.

**Miss McIlveen:** Are there standard performance indicators across all the boards?

**Mr Topping:** There are some standard indicators in the resource allocation plans, the work that we are set by the Department and in its strategic plan that all the boards deliver. There are other indicators that each board uses to measure itself year on year, because each area is different.

**Mr Sloan:** I agree with Gordon. One of our strengths is our sub-regional structure; one size does not fit all in Northern Ireland. Our sub-regional structure is made up of five boards, which means that each can see what the others do and can adopt best practice from them. There is a great deal of co-operation and cross-fertilisation. If the sub-regional structure is properly constituted by the ESA, that co-operation could be maintained; however, it will not work if there is only one board and, as someone said, if ideas are cherry-picked from England. Oscar Wilde said that Britain and America are two nations divided by a common language: the culture in England is entirely different from that here and we have entirely different needs. Something must be built in locally that allows the boards in different areas to learn from one another instead of having exactly the same thing everywhere.

**Miss McIlveen:** In his submission, Gordon Topping said that, with regard to clause 13, the details were sufficiently vague as to be able to offer only limited comment. What would you like in clause 13 to strengthen it?

**Mr Topping:** We were saying primarily that there will be a tension between what is delegated to schools, what is held centrally and what is held locally. We are concerned because we do not know how the delegation will be done. For example, every school needs literacy, so that will have a particular form. Will responsibility for that be delegated to schools, which can buy their own advice? Will it be part of a local dimension or will it all be centralised somewhere? How will responsibility be divided in areas where there is a special need or a minority subject? The tension is whether to delegate the money for those services to schools, in which case the ESA will have no control; hold the money centrally,

in which case one can dictate exactly where the resource goes; or mix and match so that some of the resource is delegated and some of it held centrally.

That is the crucial tension between central support, local support and school discretion. That is what we meant when we referred to that clause.

**Miss McIlveen:** What will be the future of the controlled sector? I am mindful of the comments made in previous submissions from the Catholic bishops. They spoke about a single employing authority and the erosion of ethos. I want you to develop the concept of ethos in the controlled sector. Also, the Southern Board referred to the ownership body. Will you comment on that, too?

**Mr Sloan:** Gordon mentioned that the ESA seems to represent a move from five authorities to one. Our concern is that the parity of support for sectors is perhaps not as it ought to be. I speak from the South Eastern Board's perspective, and, as a single board, we have been extremely careful to ensure that we never supported any particular sector more than another. All the services that we provide, including Curriculum Advisory and Support Service, special education, welfare and maintenance, are for every sector, other than perhaps the voluntary grammar and the grant-maintained integrated sectors, which are the responsibility of the Department. We have never promoted any particular schools.

The important issue of support bodies for the controlled sector must be addressed. How exactly that is done is still up for discussion. At one stage, the controlled sector was described as not having an ethos, but I do not subscribe to that view, nor, I believe, would my colleagues. In any case, no other sector is uniform; each has variations within it.

Discussion continues about how the school estate should be managed. As Gordon said, the management of an education service in Northern Ireland requires rationalisation. Some of the villages in the Southern Board area have four primary schools, where only one is needed. We had hoped that, through the establishment of a single authority, all sectors would be brought in as equal partners to devise an equal solution that satisfied everyone. Somehow, that idea has been lost, with the controlled sector in one corner and other sectors in different corners. That disturbs us slightly because we expected that sense of separation to dissipate, which would have added tremendous strength to the education system.

**Mr Topping:** We never wanted to be in the current situation in which there is a plethora of sectoral support bodies. At the outset of the discussion, we supported a single integrated authority, in which all the rights and the ethos of all interests would be protected. Sometimes, such protection may have to be enshrined

in legislation, as happened with the boards. However, we have ended up in a position whereby whatever one group has, another group must have too. We did not sign up to that at the beginning of the exercise.

There is no such protection included in the Education Bill, although there is potential to include it in a second Bill. Unfortunately, Pandora's box has been opened, and it will be difficult to put the lid back on. As a result, there are various types of sectoral support for all kinds of bodies. Without clear legislation, that detracts from the ESA's ability to manage.

**Mr Cargo:** There is a danger that the Bill under discussion, and even a second Bill, will end up addressing the wrong problem. If the problem is the need to improve the educational opportunities of children, the Bill should clearly reflect the ways in which that will be achieved; the structures would follow from that central purpose.

I make no apology for saying that I am an integrationist in the best sense of the world. Education structures should be integrated; they should recognise diversity but celebrate inclusion. What I see now in the debate is an unedifying scramble by some sectors to ensure, quite properly, that they are not left out in a sectoral body carve-up of administration. That was never the intention of the boards in subsuming their wishes for the greater good — the development of a better system. If the outworking is that we spend most of our time discussing the setting up of sectoral support bodies just so as everyone feels loved, we have lost a major opportunity to enhance the opportunities for children.

**Mr G Butler:** That reflects the Southern Board's response. We feel that it is not simply a matter of replicating everything that exists in the other sectors. If the sole purpose of the Bill is to provide a unified service, a big issue is what powers it is given. David mentioned respecting diversity and, at the same time, looking at methods of delivery that run across sectors. In particular, Stanton mentioned the need to look at the number of schools and locations and to maintain sustainable schools.

The Department's policy paper 20 did not even fully replicate what went on in other sectors. The controlled sector had major problems. The paper was really saying that we would be given the powers in principle, but that the ESA would still hold the ownership and control. To use a good old expression from north Antrim, it was neither fish nor flesh, nor good red herring.

**Mr Mulholland:** Adding to what my colleagues already said, the creation of those new bodies eats into any potential savings that there would be in the future.

**Miss McIlveen:** I will ask one final question about a point that I know my colleague wishes to develop further. Are you concerned about the fact that, when

writing about this period, historians may summarise that the boards were found wanting in their protection of the controlled sector and of the sectoral bodies that came out of that?

**Mr Topping:** No, I do not think so. Obviously, I do not want to be defensive about the boards, because we have agreed to subsume our interests for the greater good. However, we have tried to say that all children are equal and need to be treated equally; that they need to have the maximum opportunities, and that we want to provide a service that is as efficient and as integrated as possible.

Therefore, we are talking about an all-inclusive organisation that recognises the differences that exist, but that, at the same time, ensures that everyone is treated fairly. There is nothing wrong with that position. In fact, that is the high moral ground position, and we have always held it. Unfortunately, it does not look as though things are moving in that direction at present.

**Mr McCausland:** Stanton Sloan made a point about the subregional structure and used the phrase “if properly constituted”. How can that be constituted properly in order to do what needs to be done to recognise the differences across the country?

**Mr Sloan:** That really is a matter for the ESA to determine.

**Mr McCausland:** I think that it needs help. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Sloan:** One of the strengths of the current situation is the number of services that are provided locally. Certainly from the point of view of parents and schools — including the boards of governors, staff and pupils — there is a whole range of services that is provided locally.

As regards the phrase “if properly constituted”, there needs to be a clear determination as to what will be available at a subregional level, whatever number of subregional groups there may be. For example, when people spoke initially about finance, they spoke about a centralisation of the finance function. The South Eastern Board has now employed several people from the Department as LMS advisers. They work in our finance department, but they spend their time with schools, helping them directly with their budgets and with developing five-year plans. A clear process of thought must be applied to finding out what schools want — they must be asked what they need locally. Schools and parents, as the end users, are in the best position to tell you what they want and what should be located at that subregional level.

We certainly have views on the matter: I could give you a list of services, and I started to do so earlier when I talked about educational welfare and psychology. The whole area of special needs must be local. The human resources function — depending on

the resolution of the problem of employing authority and employer function — is another area where boards of governors are supported. Those issues need to be sorted out.

**Mr Cargo:** Stanton quite rightly focused on services. However, there are two key principles involved. The first is that whatever happens locally must be enshrined in the Bill. Intent cannot be relied on. Here is an opportunity to recast the system, and we need to be sure that whatever happens locally is enshrined in the legislation. It must be clear and explicit. The second is that the relationship must have a democratic accountability. It must also have a stakeholder accountability to be able to provide for schools, and it certainly has to have user accountability. Any local model needs to have those three elements built into it. It has to be integrated.

I want to mention one of the opportunities lost in this situation, which Gordon referred to at the start. We are dealing with children. One cannot divorce education from health, community capacity or the context in which children live in certain areas. We need to think seriously about including in the Bill specific clauses that provide for integrated local provision. Nelson knows, as I do from working in the inner city, that although the key determinant in moving people out of deprivation is education, there are also clear links to economic regeneration, community capacity building and health inequalities. We must write into the legislation a requirement for the education structures to collaborate in that way. We need to place a requirement on the body to define local need, otherwise an opportunity will be lost and the importance of a key dimension in education will be diluted. Education is a local service.

**Mr G Butler:** One of my hopes for a local Assembly, as one brought up in the education system throughout the period of direct rule, is that a style of joined-up government should emerge. The roles of community planning and education support should both be seen as part of how young people progress in Northern Ireland. We must tie that into not only the education debate, but the debate about where education fits into the wider picture of Northern Ireland plc, and how the Assembly sees Northern Ireland and its young people progressing and growing.

**Mr McCausland:** Stanton spoke about the functions that would be provided, and David spoke about the shape of the subregional structure. At an earlier stage, the question was asked about how that would operate. It is all very vague at present. Someone said it is a bit like a director of public prosecutions (DPP), whereby it monitors what the police are doing. That did not go down terribly well: the reaction was that all a DPP does is tick boxes and everyone ignores what it does anyway.

How do you see that local, subregional structure having a role in influencing, shaping and making decisions? What powers would it have? Would it just be a consultative group that meets but which everyone ignores, or would it have teeth? How would it work?

**Mr Cargo:** One of the themes that we have tried to get across this morning is that we believe in a regional service that is delivered locally. Education is an important requirement for young people and adults in Northern Ireland, and, undoubtedly, there needs to be a regional dimension to it so that there are coherent policies and strategies across the region that ensure accountability to the Assembly, the Minister and the citizens of Northern Ireland.

However, in its delivery, education is a local service that is tailored to meet the needs of individual communities. It is not the same in Ballinamallard as it is in Belfast or Ballycastle. Although we must ensure that we have a top-down structure that ensures coherence, we must also have in place a bottom-up process with local structures, both to capture all the views of the stakeholders and to ensure that the ESA is bound, not just to listen, but to take account, in a structured way, of area-based plans. That brings us back to area planning for provision and also for delivery of services. If you are going to deliver a service in Turf Lodge or the Shankill, the service, by its very nature, will be very different to that which would be delivered in rural Fermanagh or west Tyrone.

In addressing that local dimension, you must ensure that that there would not just be a monthly meeting to tick boxes; you must build meaningful area plans, which the ESA must take account of in legislation, and those area plans must take account of the regional strategy within which it operates.

**Mr McCausland:** I will move to a different area. Michelle spoke about ethos, and the phrase “Pandora’s box” was used earlier. I am not sure how you would describe it, but once you start to deconstruct the current system, all sorts of issues come out of the woodwork. I have learned things in this process of which I was never before aware, even though I have sat on an education and library board for many years. I doubt that anyone else who sat on an education and library board had a greater knowledge than I on those matters.

The point was well made that one of the factors must be equality for all children. The difficulty is that, by the nature of the system in Northern Ireland, children are broken up into sectors. If you do not have equality across all the sectors, you do not have equality for all children: that is our difficulty.

One of the points that the Catholic bishops made very forcefully when they appeared before the Committee recently was in relation to the role of governors. Last week, we asked the Department some questions about

the appointment of governors to controlled schools and to CCMS schools, and we look forward to the answers.

The boards also appoint governors to both of those sectors. The key point for the Catholic bishops was that governors who are appointed must be supportive of the ethos of the sector. How do boards ensure that the governors that they appoint are supportive of the ethos of the maintained sector? Do they also look at whether governors appointed in the controlled sector support its ethos? I do not know if boards do that in the same way. I have some sense of how that works in practice — of how names are put forward and the result is reached — but I have no sense of how it works with the Catholic maintained schools. How do you ensure that those people support the ethos?

**Mr Topping:** We may do it in different ways, but I guess that each board has some kind of member input into that process. We have management committees, which deal with each of the subdivisions. In our case, those subdivisions cover nine council areas, and members from each area make decisions as to who represents the board. Other boards have committees that are constituted to do that.

Although it is probably done in different ways, in practical terms, the boards ask the Catholic sector, for example, to nominate people who they think could act as board representatives and still sign up to the Catholic ethos. Local knowledge comes into play in the controlled sector, because many of the board members will have knowledge of the areas in which they serve and represent, and they will feed in names. As a result of that, a variety of names is put forward, and we then make a decision.

Some of us have trawled — not necessarily advertised — for board members in local communities. For example, we placed flyers in libraries to say that we need good people to sit on the boards. We spelt out some of the criteria that we use, and we asked people if they would be interested in putting their names forward.

Therefore, I guess that we would probably do it in different ways. That is a general summary. I am not sure if anyone wants to add to it.

**Mr Cargo:** I believe that there is a misnomer in the current system. The schools for which we have direct responsibility are called controlled schools. However, when it comes to the development of a school’s ethos and how a community perceives it, we are probably the one sector that has no control. Given the history of the past 30 years, boards have tended to leave the operation of individual controlled schools to the good sense of the local community. Obviously, there is a different scenario in the faith-based system, which, I assume, is about trying to get consistency on the core values of a particular faith throughout all schools.

Therefore, we have a problem with the title of “controlled” because everyone thinks that we control boards of governors.

As regards ethos, Nelson, we are proud that we have responded to local communities’ needs. In taking that on, as Gordon says, in the development of boards of governors, we have very much left that to the good sense of board members who often know intimately the local communities that they serve. Therefore, governors have tended to emerge from that discussion.

If we move into a different situation in which we start to have sectoral bodies, a debate emerges that is the logical outcome of questions such as, “What is the controlled sector?”; “What is its ethos?”; and, “How do you ensure that everyone in that sector complies with that ethos?”. Once you enter that debate, it will neither be short nor easy. You will end up with structures that will, perhaps, add additional layers of complexity to a structure that you are trying to simplify.

**Mr McCausland:** The logical conclusion, therefore, is that either everybody has a sectoral body, or nobody has it.

**Mr Cargo:** That could be a conclusion.

**Mr Topping:** When we were involved in the initiation of that debate with the Department, we envisaged that sectors would have their ethos and rights protected inside a regional body. However, as it stands at present, the regional body that is being created will have some difficulty, we argue, with how it manages the system and a whole pile of sectoral bodies outside it; more sectoral bodies, in fact, than we have ever seen.

**Mr Sloan:** As regards appointing governors, we operate a similar system to that of the North Eastern Education and Library Board. We try to ensure that we appoint governors who support the ethos of the school. We all visit many schools. You can go to two maintained schools, and, despite their being in the same sector and having the same Catholic ethos, each school has a different overall ethos. We discuss schools’ needs with them frequently and try to balance skills to meet those needs.

Nelson, you made a comment about treating all children equally. We all subscribe to that view absolutely and totally. It is fundamental to draw a distinction between treating all children equally and treating all children the same. To treat all children equally does not mean to treat them all the same, because account must be taken of individual differences. The same applies to schools when appointing governors. In treating all schools equally, you do not necessarily treat them all the same.

**Mr B McCrea:** There is always a danger, when you reach this stage in the proceedings, that anything that is worth saying has been said several times.

**Mr McCausland:** That will not stop you. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr B McCrea:** I thought that you had finished, Nelson, although if you want to come back to the discussion, be my guest. *[Laughter.]*

Some useful questions were asked, on which I want to press you. I apologise, therefore, if I go back over matters that I did not get a chance to discuss earlier. There are certain particularly germane matters.

Just so that you understand where I am coming from; my party is in favour of maximum devolved autonomy to schools, with appropriate oversight arrangements to ensure that no inappropriate activity occurs. We believe that the ESA, as it is currently envisaged, will become a centralised bureaucratic monster that will not allow that to happen. That is why we have significant concerns.

I have a couple of questions that I want to pick up on. You gentlemen are all in a unique position to help us, given your experience of 180 years, or whatever length of time Trevor said it was. I am not sure whether that was 180 years’ experience each.

**Mr Topping:** That is 30 years more than the last time.

**Mr B McCrea:** Well, it has been a long meeting.

Furthermore, a number of you — though not all of you — said that you are reaching the end of your specific interest in the process. Therefore, you could afford us your opinions. I am slightly disappointed — and I mean that gently — that you have not grabbed the bull by the horns and told us exactly what you think. There were a couple of times earlier when you said that you were not being political, but, of course, as the debate goes on, it becomes more expansive. However, this is not a political decision. Various members have merely asked for your opinion; they have asked you, as experienced educationalists, what you really think.

I will narrow it down to two or three points, which, throughout our discussions, emerged as the central issues. Mary asked a devastatingly simple question, which we fudged — do you, as a group or as individuals, have confidence in the ESA, as it currently stands in the proposals? I have a few other questions, but, given that you talked about crucial differences and so on, do you have confidence that the ESA, as currently outlined in the Bill, will deliver a better educational system than the one that we have now?

**Mr Topping:** I will preface my answer by saying that we refute what has been said. We answered the questions, and we tried to be as clear as possible in our answers. We said quite explicitly what we believe in. We said that we believe in a regional education authority, and that we want it to be all-inclusive. We have said that it should have a children’s service dimension, and that it should have the powers to be able to manage the

system. That is the framework within which we answered all the questions.

Basil repeated the question that was asked previously, which related to whether we have confidence in the ESA, but he added the phrase “as it currently stands”. We were asked whether we had confidence in the ESA. Of course, we have our concerns about the ESA as it currently stands in the Bill, and we expressed those concerns throughout this morning’s discussion. Therefore, as it currently stands, we would like to see changes, and we have illustrated some of the changes that we would like to see. However, we answered the question within the framework that I outlined. We believe in a regional authority that has a local dimension. We want it to be all-inclusive and to have a children’s services dimension, and it should have the ability to manage the system. We still hold to those principles.

**Mr B McCrea:** Gordon, I did not mean to imply that you were not answering the question. I am merely saying that I think there was a missed opportunity, but that is my personal view. You can answer in whatever way you think is appropriate.

You identified the phrase “the crucial tension”, and the crucial tension involved certain areas, such as clause 8 and the employability issues. We would find it useful to know about that. We received a letter from the GBA, which states that a prolonged cycle of rebuttals is possible, not least because of the Department’s predilection to argue that black is white when it comes to the employment issue.

A major issue has been raised by the GBA, the Catholic bishops and others, and you referred to it as well — is it the employer or the employing authority who has control of the employment issue?

That is probably the largest of the big three nubs that are central to what is happening. I agree that the question is one of clarity. The decision to be made is whether a centralised authority is what is wanted. However, given your experience, the question was in what way would you draw up a regional body? Can that be done on the basis of maximised devolved autonomy with some sort of oversight — along the lines of the Policing Board — or must all the powers rest with a central authority, with the associated knock-on effects?

**Mr Topping:** I thought that we had answered that question perfectly clearly, but obviously not. It has been a long time since I was in the classroom; therefore, my powers of explaining things might have diminished over the years.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am sure that the fault was mine, Gordon. I just believe that this was the key issue that we struggled with. For the sake of clarity, and in light of all of the responses, I would have liked direction,

because I feel strongly — and others have said it — that whoever controls the employment contract controls everything else.

**Mr Topping:** I agree 100%. The issue is not just employment; it is what is delegated to schools. If the employer role is delegated to schools, there are consequences — I think that that is what David was saying. Responsibility for the cost of the curriculum and its support services has consequences. If things such as the psychology service and the education and welfare service are delegated, there is a consequence.

We said that, in general terms, we support delegation to schools and placing responsibility for decision-making with those best able to make decisions — local people. That was the principle on which we operated. In the length of time that we have with the Committee, it would be impossible to go into what we would delegate to schools in addition to what they have, because that has knock-on consequences for the ability of the ESA to manage the system holistically. In principle, we support local management.

**Mr B McCrea:** OK. At another stage, it would be useful to find out whether there was any other guidance.

I expected, but did not hear, mention of the benefits of having comparator regions, although that might have come up in the general discussion — the ability to compare and contrast, albeit, that the boards have different environments. There is a danger that that capability will be lost in a centralised regional body. I think that there is strength in having comparators; is that the case?

**Mr Topping:** In summary, we said that we recognise that issue and those problems, but they can be overcome in two ways.

One way was to use other comparators — either international or national — or, as mentioned by Stanton, by using the local dimension that is likely to be created in the ESA as a means to encourage improvement.

**Mr B McCrea:** Without labouring the point, the problem is that international comparators are not, strictly speaking, useful, because they have different conditions and they also tend to deal in averages.

If one looks at the sub-regional issues that could be developed, it is difficult to pick a number that is any better than five — too many becomes too localised. I think that there is merit in the job that is currently carried out, and we should not lose that.

My final point on that issue is a challenge that is meant positively. I understand the difficulties the boards face with the Committee in front of them and the Department behind them. That is an invidious position.

Trevor Lunn asked about councillors and their involvement in the decision-making body. I am aware of difficulties with boards not making decisions about closing schools and schools running up deficits and so on because it is impossible to get a decision. When we were originally looking at setting up the ESA, I thought that part of the benefit was to take a long, hard look at that issue and try to say what the decision might be.

The issue is not about just closing schools, because there are schools that I want to argue for keeping open; I just think that there are difficulties if we are not clear about what it is that we are trying to do. What does the ESA do? What do school governors do? What do the area-based planning issues do? They are all slightly different. I am not sure that having nine councillors on a regional body will give us the outcome that we require.

I understand that we all have to work with each other, and, therefore, one has to be a little bit cautious, but there is an opportunity to sit and say:

“No, there were difficulties, and how do we resolve that particular issue?”

**Mr Topping:** We think that we recognise the point that you are making. However, in my experience, and others can speak for themselves, we have had no more difficulties from elected representatives than we have had from others. As I said, party politics rarely come to the fore, but community politics do, and weird alliances are created, particularly on school closures, when it is not necessarily politicians or elected representatives who take the lead, but other local community representatives.

That is all part of the business area, so to speak, in which we work: getting support, dealing with issues and trying to get consensus around a board table with 35 members.

**Mr B McCrea:** I agree, and this is absolutely my last statement because I understand the position. Is it right for that discussion to take place in the ESA or in some other area-based planning context?

**Mr Cargo:** Decision-making processes are a bit like appointments: you are not exclusive. Education is a community based service; therefore, it is important to reflect at all levels in the education service the totality of those who are engaged in it, and politicians have a vital role. Like Gordon, I have always found local councillors helpful in such a situation. They have good local intelligence that they can bring to the table and give an added dimension to the discussion. If they were not there, the discussion would not be as fruitful.

One need only look at the Health Service, which, for a time, had no local councillors or representatives on any of its structures. I think that, at certain times, decisions made on health were poorer for the lack of local representation. There should be local representation,

but in the ESA the local dimension as represented by those who are democratically accountable should be at the heart of the organisation. That is consistent with the structures that are being put in place.

However, it is also proper that they are there because they bring an added intelligence and impetus to discussions on what is best for certain areas, because education is about sustaining communities. If we get to a stage when we are simply putting in place what is a business structure, education will be much poorer, and the opportunities for children will be much fewer.

**Mr B McCrea:** The boards and you gentlemen have made a huge contribution, and have a further contribution to make. Given that this is not the end but the start of the process, I encourage you to carry on engaging and helping us on this issue, because these processes sometimes assume that we know what it is that we want to do, and, therefore, we will check it out. Actually, we are in a much more iterative process, whereby one takes on ideas and decides that perhaps we will do it this way.

I do think that you are central to it, and I implore you to try and find a way of feeding more into our debate.

**Mr Topping:** We will provide whatever help in this process that the Committee wants.

**Mr B McCrea:** I finished too quickly.

**The Chairperson:** We have considered various issues, but there is one on which I would like your opinion. You expressed a clear view on the inspectorate, but I would like you to expand on the role of the inspector and his or her ability to carry out their functions independently. I think that it was Mr Mulholland who dealt with that part. He seemed to imply that there would be a conflict of interest between the inspectorate's role with regard to the curriculum and the policy and its overseeing role. What is the concern there? It is something that we have considered and discussed, but not in much detail.

**Mr Mulholland:** The inspectorate values its independence, and it perceives itself to be independent. Clause 37 establishes the powers of the inspectors. The inspectorate is still part of the Department of Education and is overseen by it, and it will be party to the policies that come from the Department. Therefore there will be a perceived conflict of interest when inspectors are carrying out their inspectoral role: monitoring, inspecting, reviewing, and reporting on Department of Education policy in schools. There was an opportunity in the Bill to establish the independence of the inspectorate, much as there is in England. That is an opportunity lost.

**Mr McCausland:** The inspectorate is situated in the Department. However, is it separate from the Department?

**Mr Mulholland:** It is an integral part of the Department of Education.

**Mr Topping:** We understand that the chief inspector is part of the senior management team of the Department and its principal educational adviser.

**The Chairperson:** We will come back to that.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Is it not the case that a conflict of interest would arise if he or she was the inspector of the Department rather than of schools on behalf of the Department?

**Mr Mulholland:** The inspector inspects the policies that come from the Department and their implementation in schools.

**Mr O'Dowd:** A conflict of interest would arise if there was an inspector of the Department. For instance, if this Committee's role is to inspect the Department of Education, and the members were from one party — which I wish was the case — *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Topping:** We are making the point that was made across the water, and it relates to why there are independent inspectorates outside the Department. The basic thrust of Mr Mulholland's argument is that there is an inspectorate that is party to devising a policy on an issue. That policy will be implemented in schools through the boards or the CCMS, for instance, and an inspector will inspect its implications and workings. If an inspector says that the policy is a disaster, he or she is criticising themselves, because he or she was party to devising the policy advice that went to the Minister.

**Mr Cargo:** It would strengthen the system if there was a clear separation. The Belfast Education and Library Board made a further point around the clarity in respect of separation of functions, and we thought that it was an opportunity lost. The role of the inspectorate should be strengthened to make it a more accountable and independent body that will provide quality information, without fear or favour to anyone.

**Mr G Butler:** I will refrain from discussion on this topic because my wife is an inspector. I declare that interest for the record.

**Mr Lunn:** It sounds so obvious and simple, but has it caused a problem in the past? Can you provide an instance where an inspector's ability to act independently was compromised by his membership of the Department.

**Mr Topping:** I do not know; we cannot comment on that as we are not aware of any.

**Mr Lunn:** How long has that arrangement been in place? Since the mists of time?

**Mr Topping:** Yes.

**Mr Lunn:** And it has not caused a problem: Mr Topping: No.

**The Chairperson:** Gordon, Stanton, Barry, David, and Gregory, thank you all very much for your contributions to the discussion. A paper has been

prepared by the Department in response to the issues that have been raised, which the Committee will make available to you. You are all welcome to stay — if you wish.

Members, I am conscious that time is marching on.

**Mr McCausland:** Time is moving on, and we have the response from the Department. We will not be able to go into that in any great depth. Would it be in order, once the response goes to the boards, for us to ask each of the five boards to come back to us with their view of the response, as they had a list of specific points?

**The Chairperson:** Yes. That is what we have been trying to encourage up until now.

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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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## COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

1 April 2009

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### FINANCIAL PROVISIONS BILL (NIA 6/08)

#### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)  
Mr Simon Hamilton (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Fra McCann  
Mr Declan O'Loan  
Mr Ian Paisley Jnr  
Mr Peter Weir

#### Witnesses:

Mr Michael Daly	} Department of Finance and Personnel
Ms Brenda Shearer	
Mr David Thomson	

**The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin):** The Department gave the Committee a pre-introduction briefing on the Financial Provisions Bill on 4 February. At that briefing, the Committee requested further information on the proposal to remove the need to produce separate finance accounts. The response from the Department is in members' information packs.

The Bill was subsequently introduced in the Assembly, and has reached its Committee Stage. The Committee sought the views of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee, as the scope of the Bill is within their remit, too. Their responses indicated that they had no issues to raise.

The Committee's public consultation on the Bill ends at close of play today, and no responses have been received to date. So, we are overwhelmed. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Weir:** Overwhelmed with apathy.

**The Chairperson:** Nonetheless, I invite Michael to make some introductory comments, and then we will open the meeting to members.

**Mr Michael Daly (Department of Finance and Personnel):** I do not have an awful lot to add to what the Chairperson said. The Second Stage debate on the Bill covered a number of issues that Members raised.

The Minister replied to some of them during the debate, and wrote to Members about others. However, there may be other issues that Committee members might want to raise now.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. Members, have we —

**Mr Hamilton:** Any holiday plans?

**The Chairperson:** Is that a question? I am overwhelmed by the responses from the Committee, too. So, Michael, may I just wish you well, and keep up the good work. Obviously, you are satisfying opinion around this table.

**Mr Hamilton:** Declan, could you not even ask something about social housing to take the bad look off us?

**Mr O'Loan:** Just so that we have something to write in the report.

**The Chairperson:** No, but I will make sure that the —

**Mr Weir:** There is something coming through from David McNarry. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:** It is quite evident from the members who sent their apologies that they are the people who have the real interest in this subject. So, I can only apologise to those colleagues who attended today.



# 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 13 March 2009

## Written Answers to Questions

### OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

#### Lillian Ladele Case

**Mr Simpson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the implications for the application of (i) section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; (ii) all other UK equality legislation; and (iii) EU Directives, of the ruling by the Central London Employment Tribunal in the case of Lillian Ladele.

(AQW 1675/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness):** Section 75(1) of the NI Act 1998 imposes a general statutory duty on all public authorities (as defined under section 75(3)). This duty requires a public authority to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity in the discharge of all its functions. The Executive has previously stated its commitment to observing this statutory duty. Further detailed enforcement duties also arise under Schedule 9 of the Act, which is given effect by Section 75(4). Various remedies are available to any citizen or group asserting any failure to comply with either the general statutory duty in Section 75(1) or the detailed enforcement duties in Schedule 9.

It is important to note that the Lillian Ladele case has since been successfully appealed at the Employment Appeal Tribunal. Since it is a case outside this jurisdiction it will have persuasive but not binding authority here. It is an example of the way in which the Courts balance competing interests (in this case between someone who had a conscientious objection to officiating at civil partnerships between couples of the same sex on the one hand and the rights of those couples to enter into a civil partnership on the other).

A Court in Northern Ireland may or may not adopt the same approach in corresponding circumstances. Under domestic and European legislation each case would be decided in the light of the particular issues and facts involved.

#### Training for Women Network

**Ms J McCann** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the reasons for the delay in the Peace III application submitted by the Training for Women Network which was approved by the Special European Union Programmes Body in August 2008.

(AQW 3678/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Following the approval from SEUPB it was necessary to ensure the project complied with government accounting requirements. This has been completed and Departmental approval of the Training for Women Network was given just before Christmas. A formal Letter of Offer was issued to Training for Women Network on 22 December 2008 by the Special European Union Programmes Body.

#### Child Poverty

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many children deemed as living in child poverty are residing in; (i) homes with a single parent; (ii) homes with two parents but only one parent working; and (iii) homes with two unemployed parents.

(AQW 4989/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** There are three measurements of poverty – relative, absolute and mixed.

Relative income poverty describes families living below 60% of the median wage. It is estimated that the number of children in relative income poverty living in:

- (i) lone parent families is around 40,900
- (ii) couple families with only one parent working is around 12,400
- (iii) couple families with both not in work is around 16,500

The remainder of those children in poverty live in families with both parents working; this number is estimated to be around 21,100.

These figures have been sourced from the Households Below Average Income, NI, 2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07.

Because of the small numbers in the survey for this analysis it has been necessary to combine the three years of data.

### Ministerial Subcommittee on Poverty and Social Exclusion

**Mr Elliott** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when will the first meeting of the Executive Subcommittee on Poverty and Social Exclusion take place; and what will the agenda be. (AQW 5127/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** We propose to hold the first meeting of the Executive Subcommittee on Poverty and Social Inclusion on 26 March 2009. An agenda for this first meeting is still to be agreed.

The Executive Sub-Committee will be responsible for agreeing the priorities and key Executive actions for tackling poverty and social inclusion here and also agreeing the monitoring and reporting mechanisms associated with the 'Lifetime Opportunities' Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Once the Executive Sub-Committee has met, we would intend to convene a first meeting of the re-established Ministerially-led Poverty and Social Inclusion Stakeholder Forum.

### Cost of Trips and Ministerial Visits

**Mr Attwood** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the total (i) travel; and (ii) accommodation costs incurred by its Department on trips and ministerial visits since May 2007, broken down by (a) Ministers; and (b) senior officials. (AQW 5301/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The following table sets out the costs incurred by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to official travel by staff and Ministers in pursuance of Departmental business objectives since 8 May 2007. These costs fall into two financial years and include mileage allowances, accommodation costs, subsistence and all other associated costs of travel.

It is not possible to split staff travel, accommodation and subsistence costs by seniority or grade of staff. The figures provided relate to all grades of staff in OFMDFM.

Category of spend	2007-08 (£'s)		2008-09 (£'s)	
	Ministers	Officials	Ministers	Officials
Accommodation	5,924	137,872	6,779	38,555
Subsistence	6,783	69,262	0	10,565
Travel – air, road, rail, sea and subsistence	39,551	302,821	47,966	239,130
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>562,213</b>		<b>342,995</b>

## Advertising Expenditure

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much has been spent on advertisements placed in regional and local newspapers, broken down by each newspaper, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5476/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Table A provides the classified advertising expenditure, broken down by individual newspaper, of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for financial years 05/06, 06/07, 07/08 and this year to date.

The Department did not carry out campaign advertising during this period.

TABLE A

Newspaper Group	Title	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 Year to Date
Alpha Newspaper Group	Ballymena Guardian	£166.26	-	-	-
	Coleraine Chronicle	£332.50	-	-	-
	East Antrim Gazette	£152.69	-	-	-
	Northern Constitution	£332.52	-	-	-
	Strabane Weekly News	£117.05	-	-	-
	The Leader	£166.26	-	-	-
	The Outlook	£305.68	-	-	-
	Tyrone Constitution	£234.10	-	£95.26	-
	Tyrone Courier	£152.68	-	-	-
	Ulster Gazette	£152.68	-	-	-
Alpha Newspaper Group Total		£2,112.42	£0.00	£95.26	£0.00
Independent News and Media	Belfast Telegraph	£19,918.78	£19,933.57	£14,656.04	£7,600.66
	Community Telegraph	£599.54	-	-	-
Independent News and Media Group Total		£20,518.32	£19,933.57	£14,656.04	£7,600.66
Johnston Publishing	Ballymena Times	£195.10	-	-	-
	Belfast News	£329.12	-	-	£2,015.00
	Coleraine Times	£203.58	-	-	-
	Derry Journal	£186.61	£1,548.94	£1,153.27	-
	Dromore Leader	£373.22	-	-	-
	Lisburn Star	-	£180.60	-	-
	Londonderry Sentinel	-	£1,177.12	£1,219.09	-
	Lurgan Mail	£190.00	-	-	-
	Mid Ulster Mail	£519.12	-	-	-
	News Letter	£11,365.98	£11,836.06	£5,446.60	£2,562.99
	Newtownabbey Times	£195.10	-	-	-
	Portadown Times	£196.79	-	-	-
	Roe Valley Sentinel	£195.09	-	-	-
	Tyrone Times	£315.54	-	-	-
	Ulster Star	£222.24	-	-	-

Newspaper Group	Title	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 Year to Date
Johnston Publishing Group Total		£14,487.49	£14,742.72	£7,818.96	£4,577.99
North West of Ireland Printing and Publishing Company	Fermanagh Herald	£152.68	-	£130.50	-
	Strabane Chronicle	£305.36	-	-	-
	Ulster Herald	£305.36	-	£130.50	-
North West of Ireland Printing and Publishing Company Group Total		£763.40	£0.00	£261.00	£0.00
Observer Group	Armagh Observer	£305.37	-	-	-
	Ballymena Chronicle	£101.79	-	-	-
	Dungannon Observer	£203.58	-	-	-
	Fermanagh News	£101.79	-	-	-
	Lurgan and Portadown Examiner	£101.79	-	-	-
	Mid Ulster Observer	£305.37	-	-	-
	The Democrat	£101.79	-	-	-
Observer Group Total		£1,221.48	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Spectator Group	Co Down Spectator	£176.43	-	-	-
	Newtownards Chronicle	£176.43	-	-	-
Spectator Group Total		£352.86	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Thomas Crosbie Holdings	Down Democrat	£95.00	-	-	-
	Newry Democrat	£95.00	-	£91.35	-
Thomas Crosbie Holdings Group Total		£190.00	£0.00	£91.35	£0.00
Belfast Media Group	Andersonstown News	£424.12	£180.60	-	-
Irish News Group	Irish News	£9,429.24	£7,287.15	£4,601.61	£3,801.96
Independent Title	Irish Independent	-	£2,193.21	£3,903.23	-
Independent Title	Irish Times	£2,628.62	£12,319.24	£3,621.85	£5,850.00
Independent Title	Banbridge Chronicle	£373.90	-	-	-
Independent Title	Crossmaglen Examiner	£60.20	-	-	-
Independent Title	Derry News	£149.29	£267.96	-	-
Independent Title	Down Recorder	£169.65	-	-	-
Independent Title	Impartial Reporter	£132.32	-	£117.45	-
Independent Title	Mourne Observer	£325.72	-	-	-
Independent Title	Newry Reporter	£162.86	-	£138.33	-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£53,501.89</b>	<b>£56,924.45</b>	<b>£35,305.08</b>	<b>£21,830.61</b>

Advertising expenditure for the Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) is not readily available by individual newspaper.

Table B provides the total advertising expenditure by NDPBs for financial years 05/06, 06/07, 07/08 and 08/09 to date.

TABLE B

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Commissioner for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland	£ -	£ -	£ -	£ 7,381.94
Ilex Urban Regeneration Company Limited	Not available	£ 4,940.63	£ 23,909.64	£ 19,844.26
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People	Not available	£ 6,831.06	£ 12,913.00	£ 18,980.41
Planning Appeals Commission & Water Appeals Commission	£ 121,236.04	£ 108,638.52	£ 49,898.57	£ 57,288.56
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland	£ 55,876.12	£ 69,864.58	£ 56,805.12	£ 45,706.79
Strategic Investment Board	Not available	£ 35,500.00	£ 87,172.89	£ 39,563.01
<b>Total</b>	<b>£ 177,112.16</b>	<b>£ 225,774.79</b>	<b>£ 230,699.22</b>	<b>£ 188,764.97</b>

### NI Bureau in Washington

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what was the cost of running the NI Bureau in Washington DC, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5478/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Costs for each of the last three complete financial years are:

2005/06	£644,643
2006/07	£616,646
2007/08	£769,960

### Cost of Hospitality

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what was the cost of hospitality by its Department in (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) in the rest of the UK; and (iii) overseas, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5479/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The following table sets out the Department's expenditure on hospitality and entertainment for each of the last three financial years 2006/07, 2007/08 and 2008/09 to 31 December 2008. It is not possible to split expenditure between (i) Northern Ireland and (ii) in the rest of the UK.

Description	2006/07 (£)	2007/08 (£)	2008/09 (to 31 Dec 08) (£)
Hospitality in NI & UK	41,879	104,621	100,448
Hospitality overseas	36,644	102,000	57,905
<b>Total</b>	<b>78,523</b>	<b>206,621</b>	<b>158,353</b>

## Implementation of EU Legislation and Regulation

**Mr Simpson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to its answer to AQW 3849/09, to outline the manner in which Ministers and officials cooperate with the UK Government regarding the implementation of European Union relevant legislation and regulation. (AQW 5639/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The 2001 Memorandum of Understanding sets out the principles underlying relations between the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations. Its Concordat on Co-ordination of European Union Policy Issues outlines how Executive Ministers and officials handle co-operation with the UK Government on the implementation and enforcement of European Union obligations, infraction proceedings, and the scrutiny of European legislation.

Junior Ministers also attend JMC (Europe) which meets on a periodic basis. The JMC(E) is chaired by the Foreign Secretary and all other relevant Ministers from the devolved administrations are invited to attend.

Officials also have regular contact with UK representatives in Brussels on all matters of relevance.

## Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

**Mr Poots** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much was spent in 2006/07 and 2007/08 on legal fees by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, and how much was spent on the judicial review on the ban on spanking, and on appealing the original decision. (AQW 5663/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland has advised that the amounts paid in legal fees and the judicial review on the defence of reasonable parental punishment in 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 were as follows:

	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Legal Fees (excluding Reasonable Parental Punishment)	£8,172.50	£39,963.18	
Judicial Review on Reasonable Parental Punishment costs	£31,164.18	£12,951.37	
The appeal on the original decision costs			£37,213.6

The appeal ruling stated that the Commissioner has to pay costs. The respondent is not yet able to provide a schedule of costs for the appeal hearing.

## US Immigration

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will consider initiating discussions with the UK Government and the US administration about developing arrangements to allow passengers to pre-clear US Immigration at Belfast International Airport. (AQW 5688/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Due to the low volume of direct flights between Belfast International Airport and the United States we have no plans to initiate discussions with the UK Government and the US administration about arrangements for pre-clearance of US Immigration.

## Strategic Investment Board

**Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a breakdown of external travel costs for the Strategic Investment Board for each of the last five years, including (i) destination; (ii) length of stay; (iii) reason for trip; (iv) cost of flights; (v) cost of hotels; and (vi) any other expenses. (AQW 5743/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The following table sets out the Strategic Investment Board's expenditure on travel costs for each of the last five years. It is not possible to split expenditure between external and internal travel, nor is it possible to extract the details of individual trips.

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009 10 mths to Jan 09
Flights	101,094.63	34,848.48	78,196.68	39,954.12	26,146.71
Hotels	83,312.05	41,775.55	27,136.01	19,375.07	10,103.63
Subsistence	32,838.29	19,599.90	9,768.67	2,283.48	1,720.72
Mileage	6,482.92	15,049.19	17,090.56	13,763.00	15,060.00
Taxis	26,408.64	31,271.67	26,242.17	6,708.89	9,508.59
Parking	4,208.53	2,652.19	4,032.45	2,585.05	2,375.15
Public Transport	2,012.78	8,436.86	6,394.87	4,531.11	3,971.69
	<b>256,357.84</b>	<b>153,633.84</b>	<b>168,861.41</b>	<b>89,200.72</b>	<b>68,886.49</b>

SIB will travel abroad occasionally in order to meet bidders and funders; to participate in conferences and seminars and for research purposes.

Until 2007, SIB relied heavily on seconded staff and the figures before then include the cost of travel and accommodation arrangements for such staff.

SIB does not own or operate official cars.

### Strategic Investment Board

**Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a breakdown of internal travel costs for the Strategic Investment Board including (i) cost of running official cars; (ii) mileage expenses; and (iii) hotels, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5744/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The following table sets out the Strategic Investment Board's expenditure on travel costs for each of the last five years. It is not possible to split expenditure between external and internal travel, nor is it possible to extract the details of individual trips.

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009 10 mths to Jan 09
Flights	101,094.63	34,848.48	78,196.68	39,954.12	26,146.71
Hotels	83,312.05	41,775.55	27,136.01	19,375.07	10,103.63
Subsistence	32,838.29	19,599.90	9,768.67	2,283.48	1,720.72
Mileage	6,482.92	15,049.19	17,090.56	13,763.00	15,060.00
Taxis	26,408.64	31,271.67	26,242.17	6,708.89	9,508.59
Parking	4,208.53	2,652.19	4,032.45	2,585.05	2,375.15
Public Transport	2,012.78	8,436.86	6,394.87	4,531.11	3,971.69
	<b>256,357.84</b>	<b>153,633.84</b>	<b>168,861.41</b>	<b>89,200.72</b>	<b>68,886.49</b>

SIB will travel abroad occasionally in order to meet bidders and funders; to participate in conferences and seminars and for research purposes.

Until 2007, SIB relied heavily on seconded staff and the figures before then include the cost of travel and accommodation arrangements for such staff.

SIB does not own or operate official cars.

### Strategic Investment Board

**Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much the Strategic Investment Board has spent on salaries in each of the last five years. (AQW 5745/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The following table sets out the Strategic Investment Boards's expenditure on salaries for each of the last five years.

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009 10 mths to Jan 09
Salaries	697,483	965,890	1,064,075	1,476,177	1,460,436

### Presbyterian Mutual Society

**Mr Butler** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on its discussions with Gordon Brown about extending the UK Government's savings protection scheme to the Presbyterian Mutual Society. (AQW 5761/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** On 25 February 2009 we met with Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Also at the meeting were the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the Secretaries of State for each of the devolved administrations. While the primary intention was to have a discussion about the general economic downturn we did take the opportunity to strongly register our concerns about the handling of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS) case. We impressed upon the Prime Minister the need to help ordinary depositors who had been disadvantaged by the circumstances and current approach to PMS. We emphasised our central concern that there should be a fair and equitable treatment of PMS depositors.

The Prime Minister, and indeed Secretary of State Sean Woodward, were clearly aware of the PMS case and we agreed that a separate meeting dedicated specifically to this issue was warranted. This will be arranged in the near future.

### Trade Unions

**Mr McKay** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what meetings it has had with trade unions in the past 6 months. (AQW 5767/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** On 14th October 2008, as part of a series of meetings about the economic downturn, we met with a group of trade unionists comprising the following: -

- Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- NIPSA
- Ulster Teachers Union
- UNISON
- UNITE
- Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers
- UCATT - Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians

The topics discussed included the state of the local economy including the effects of the recession, the cost of living and the construction industry. The views of trade unions, along with other groups consulted by us, were taken into account as part of the Executive's consideration of measures to help deal with the economic downturn.

On 4 November 2008 and 5 February 2009 we met representatives of Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The topics discussed include future relationships with the Executive, the use of Public Private Partnerships and the economy.

To date individual unions have not requested separate meetings with us.

### Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

**Mr Lunn** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on progress on the publication of the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy. (AQO 2106/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** We are continuing to develop and refine the programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. Improving relationships between and within communities in Northern Ireland and building a shared and better future remains a top priority for this Department and the Executive.

We believe that our work at Ministerial level in OFMDFM as well as throughout the Department at all levels, has demonstrated our commitment to building cohesive, inclusive communities.

The fact that we have been delivering substantial additional funding secured in the Executive's budget is just one of our achievements. We have increased funding by a third for the period 2008-2011, from £21 million in the previous CSR 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 these resources are used in an effective way therefore we have been assessing existing programmes and considering new approaches to ensure tangible outcomes from our funding and actions.

We have increased funding to minority ethnic groups by two-thirds.

Funding for youth and interface workers has been increased by a quarter.

Statistics show that the work that we fund and resource is delivering real and meaningful outcomes. A 12% drop in racist hate crime between 2006/07 and 2007/08. Likewise, a reduction in sectarian motivated crimes from 1,217 in 2006/07 to 1,056 in 2007/08. Three out of five young people in 2007 reported that relationships between Protestants and Catholics were getting better.

But, we are not complacent. We are leading and driving change in our society – and we are leading and driving change in our work through the Department and the Executive to deliver a shared and better future for all our people.

### **Racial Attack in South Belfast**

**Mr A Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the recent racial attack in South Belfast; and what action it is taking to promote racial equality in this area. (AQO 2122/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** We unreservedly condemn the recent attack on the Bangladeshi student, Sazzadur Rahman, on the evening of Friday 6 February in the Donegall Road area of South Belfast.

Foreign students, like migrant workers, are a valuable resource both to our society and for our economy. We understand that local community representatives and the PSNI's Minority Liaison Officer have been in contact with Mr Rahman to offer him advice and support.

We note the latest figures provided by the PSNI which indicate that there has been a reduction in racist crime and racist incidents in the South Belfast area. Over the period 1 April 2008 – 1 November 2008, there were 81 racist incidents and 61 racist crimes, compared to 117 racist incidents and 79 racist crimes over the same period the previous year. This reflects some of the very positive work which has been carried out by Government, the PSNI and community workers in the area.

We will continue to support preventative measures and capacity building of many local community groups, including those within the South Belfast area, through our Minority Ethnic Development Fund. To this end, and as part of our ongoing work to combat racism and to promote good relations, we recently launched our Minority Ethnic Development Fund for the incoming financial year.

The £1 million we have allocated this year represents a substantial increase on the previous annual spend prior to the restoration of devolution. This is clear evidence of our commitment to good relations and good race relations. Whilst we clearly cannot prevent all racial incidents and crimes, we are determined to do what we can to both prevent them occurring and to support those who are victims.

### **Sexual Orientation Issues**

**Dr Farry** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration will be given to sexual orientation issues in the forthcoming strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. (AQO 2124/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) is currently being considered and we plan to present our proposals in the near future. However, at present the development of the CSI policy remains work in progress. Once published we will undertake a full consultation process on our proposals.

We are committed to challenging all intolerance. OFMDFM is currently refreshing a draft Sexual Orientation Equality Strategy and a supporting Cross-Departmental Action Plan for presentation to Ministers for consideration by the OFMDFM Committee and the Executive by early summer 2009.

### Reports and Consultation Documents

**Mr McKay** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6003/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** When they receive notification that a publication is being issued, each MLA has the option of accessing the publication on the relevant Departmental website or requesting a hard copy. Departments will facilitate MLAs' preferred method of receipt.

## DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Increasing the Usage of E-mail

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of e-mail. (AQW 5618/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):** DARD is committed to reducing the amount of paper usage and increasing electronic communication. E-mail systems were introduced into DARD in the early 90s and all non-industrial staff have e-mail access. Extensive use is made of this channel, both internally and over the internet to customers. For example over the last 30 day period, DARD staff sent an average of 15,500 e-mails per day and received 34,000 per day. An e-mail policy is in place and staff are encouraged not to print unless necessary.

DARD, in common with other Departments, introduced the TRIM electronic records management system in 2007/08. Since its implementation, 1.4 million documents have been stored electronically in DARD rather than in paper files.

Other measures introduced which cut down on paper include:

- DARD eNewsletter e-mailed to 4,000 farmers each month.
- Promotion of electronic services with 26% of cattle birth registrations and 100% of cattle eartag authorisations now taking place on-line.
- A policy of ensuring information and publications are available through the DARD web presence resulting in over 400,000 page views and 97,000 publication downloads in the month of January 2009.
- Extensive use of the intranet to keep staff up to date.

### Rivers Agency

**Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures have been put in place by Rivers Agency to mitigate the impact of flooding on residents living in close proximity to the Sixmilewater River, Antrim. (AQW 5627/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Having witnessed at first hand the effects of flooding I fully understand your concerns and can assure you that the Rivers Agency is doing all that it can to reduce the risk of flooding from the Sixmilewater River at Antrim. To this end general maintenance works at a number of locations along the river have already been undertaken. In addition my staff are continuing to provide flood emergency response as required. The Agency is also undertaking detailed investigations to identify how best to manage the risk of flooding at Antrim.

### NI Cut Flower Growers Association

**Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussion her Department has had with the Northern Ireland Cut Flower Growers Association to promote its industry. (AQW 5628/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My Department has worked very closely with all cut flower and foliage businesses in the North to help develop the sector over the last ten years. DARD through CAFRE, Greenmount Campus, has taken a lead role in the development of cut flower and foliage technology and its transfer to businesses. In addition growers have been provided with significant training in both technical and marketing issues. The sector has grown from 12 businesses with a farm gate value of just over £200,000 in 2004 to 30 businesses worth approximately £850,000 in 2008.

My staff have organised regular meetings through the Cut Flower and Foliage Development Group to help increase co-operation and collaboration between local growers. The creation of a NI Cut Flower Growers Association was proposed by a local grower at one of these meetings. My staff supported this initiative, encouraging local growers to form a representative group and elect their own chairperson. However Growers have not felt confident enough to do this as yet.

A considerable amount of emphasis has been placed on the promotion and marketing of locally grown flowers and foliage by my Department.

Supply Chain Development Branch staff together with Crops and Horticulture Development Branch staff have worked very closely with growers to help them improve their supply chains and promote and market their products. This has been achieved through the implementation of Supply Chain Awareness Programme and the Supply Chain Development Programme, and facilitation of communication and collaboration with wholesalers, grower/packers, florists, retail multiples buyers and a Dutch agent.

During 2008 my Department worked with growers to implement an extensive promotional campaign aimed at florists, wholesalers and the general public. A summary of initiatives is within the Background Note. Ongoing promotional activities are planned for 2009 in conjunction with local growers.

### NI Cut Flower Growers Association

**Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what grant assistance is available to cut flower growers for processing and marketing. (AQW 5629/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Financial assistance may be available to cut flower growers involved in the processing and marketing of cut flowers through a number of schemes under the Rural Development Programme.

The Processing & Marketing Grant Scheme provides capital support for capital investment to erect new buildings, refurbish old buildings and buy new equipment. This scheme is not available to projects relating to normal farm-based production and storage activity.

The Market Development Grant Scheme provides financial support for businesses to improve the marketing of their produce.

The Supply Chain Development Programme will facilitate co-operation and collaboration in supply chains between producers and processors.

The Processing & Marketing Grant and Marketing Development Grant Schemes are delivered directly by DARD and are currently open for applications. The Supply Chain Development Programme is due to open for applications later this year.

Departmental staff have met with most of the cut flower growers to discuss and promote these schemes.

### Ten-Day Payment Target

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much of the total amount due to suppliers has been paid within the ten-day payment target. (AQW 5640/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My Department for the months of December 2008 and January 2009 has paid £27,147,000 from a total amount of £30,809,000 within the ten-day payment target.

### Department Funding to Groups in Lagan Valley

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the amount; and (ii) the nature of funding that her Department has provided to groups in the Lagan Valley constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5810/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My Department awarded £837,176.09 to groups in the Lagan Valley constituency through letters of offer issued in 2006. Funding was distributed throughout 2007 and 2008. There were no relevant letters of offer in either 2007 or 2008.

The recipients and nature of the awards made are detailed in the attached table. The figure rises to £971,034.54 taking into account awards to individuals and businesses.

#### GROUPS IN THE LAGAN VALLEY CONSTITUENCY FUNDED IN THE LAST THREE YEARS

Operational Programme Name	Measure Description	Project Title	Organisation Name	Letter of Offer Accepted on	Grant Award (£)
Building Sustainable Prosperity	4.6 Basic Services for the Rural Economy and Population	Harry Ferguson Memorial Garden and Information Centre	Harry Ferguson Celebration Committee	19-12-06	50,000.00
		Rural Lisburn Regeneration Programme	Lisburn LEADER Ltd.	21-12-06	593,604.90
Peace II Extension	1.11 Rural Reconciliation and Regeneration	Forward with Brookemount	Brookemount Cultural and Education Society	20-07-06	43,571.19
		Maghaberry Village Centre	Maghaberry Community Association	12-12-06	150,000.00
Total					837,176.09

### Forest Service

**Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1834/09, how it aligns with Forest Service's commitment to retain its UK Woodland Assurance Standard certification. (AQW 5817/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My answer to AQW 1834/09 aligns very closely with the Forest Service's commitment to retain its UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) certification.

Restoration of planted ancient woodland sites (PAWS) is a requirement of the Standard, which was published in 2000. Forest Service received its first certificate in respect of UKWAS in May 2000, having initiated a survey to determine the location of planted ancient woodland sites under its stewardship.

The Forest Service was found to be fully compliant with the PAWS restoration requirement within the standard following the completion of survey work in early 2001 and development of a restoration strategy.

This position has been maintained and carried forward to the current certification period of 2005 to 2010, in respect of which independent audits to assess conformance with the UKWAS PAWS restoration requirement have been conducted on four occasions.

Conformance with this requirement is an important aspect of the Forest Service's commitment to retain its UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) certification. This will be subject to further audits going forward, including a full re-assessment in 2010.

### Maintenance of Forest Parks

**Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what budget is available for the maintenance of forest parks; and when Castlewellan Forest Park complex was last painted. (AQW 5913/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** A budget of £120,000 has been made available, in the current financial year, for the maintenance and refurbishment of buildings in the Forest Service estate. Castlewellan Forest Park complex was last painted 7 years ago.

### Public Accountability Training

**Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what was the cost of Public Accountability Training of all those on the Statutory Joint Committee of the Local Action Group; and what is the planned cost for any future training of members of other tiers. (AQW 5915/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The provision of Public Accountability training has yet to be completed for all members of the seven Joint Council Committees acting as local action group Administrative and Lead Financial Actors, who will collectively be administering in excess £100m on behalf of my Department. At present £2,939.10 has been paid in respect of training and the balance for providing training, including 1 'wash up' course for those who were either unable or failed to attend their agreed course, will be in the region of £4770.

### Phytophthora Ramorum Disease

**Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plan her Department has to deal with the threat to plants and trees of the pathogens (i) phytophthora ramorum; and (ii) phytophthora kernoviae, as 19 historical National Trust gardens in other parts of the UK were affected by phytophthora in December 2008. (AQW 6052/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My inspectors carry out annual surveys for Phytophthora ramorum and Phytophthora kernoviae. To date, only Phytophthora ramorum has been found here.

The Plant Health (Phytophthora ramorum) Order (NI) 2005 prohibits the introduction and spread of P.ramorum. My Inspectors have the powers to take necessary steps to ensure that the infection is controlled. In order to prevent the disease from becoming established, measures to contain and eradicate infection are taken on premises where it is found. These include the issue of statutory destruction notices for infected plant material, and prohibitions on movement of plants in the immediate vicinity of the infection.

### Phytophthora Ramorum Disease

**Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many incidences of (i) phytophthora ramorum; and (ii) phytophthora kernoviae diseases have been recorded in each year, since legislation was introduced by the Forestry Commission in 2002. (AQW 6053/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Annual surveys for Phytophthora ramorum / Phytophthora kernoviae are carried out by my inspectors at nurseries and garden centres, green sites, and forestry sites in the north of Ireland. The first finding of P.ramorum was confirmed in early 2003. P. kernoviae has not been found here. The results of the surveys are as follows:

#### NUMBER OF OUTBREAK SITES (P.RAMORUM)

Year	Nurseries / Garden Centres	Green Sites*	Forestry Sites
02/03	5	Nil	Nil
03/04	6	Nil	Nil
04/05	2	Nil	Nil
05/06	3	Nil	Nil
06/07	2	2	Nil
07/08	5	4	Nil
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Nil</b>

\* Green sites include public and private gardens, estates, public parks, and similar open areas that include established plantings.

### **Bereavement: Farming Families**

**Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she has taken to advise farmers on how to handle their business affairs in the circumstances of family bereavement. (AQO 2256/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I fully understand that a family bereavement is a very difficult time and dealing with the transfer of business ownership would not be a priority in these circumstances. As part of the ongoing dialogue with industry stakeholders, the NI Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA) highlighted the delay many farm businesses experience in receiving DARD payments following the death of the Head of Business. Since my Department cannot make any payments to a farm business until the legal process clarifies who is entitled to receive such payments, I acted on this feedback and commissioned officials to prepare an advisory leaflet to help farmers become more aware of the issue and resolve these difficulties. The leaflet, 'Succession Planning for Farmers' was published in April 2008 and highlights the importance of making legal arrangements for the future ownership of the farm businesses. Following a press launch, the leaflet was made available to farmers through DARD offices and on the DARD website. In addition copies were provided to both NIAPA and UFU.

### **Forests: East Antrim**

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to market the forests in the East Antrim area for outdoor pursuits. (AQO 2257/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Our forests offer great potential for the development of recreation and public access opportunities for local people and visitors alike. Forest Service woodland in the East Antrim and adjacent areas continues to be used extensively for informal public recreation as well as for more specific events. Existing facilities are marketed through a wide variety of media including the Forest Service web site, the WalkNI site sponsored by the Tourist Board, at information kiosks located at Forest Parks, through leaflets and tourist road signs.

We recognise that the demand for recreational use of forests is changing and that the expectations of today's visitors have changed. In response to this, Forest Service has recently consulted on a draft strategy to develop the recreational and social use of our forests. The strategy, which will be published after Easter, recognises that Forest Service cannot achieve this development on its own and emphasises that partnership working with others, both commercial and with other public bodies, will enable much more to be done. For example, Forest Service are already working with NI Environment Agency in relation to the renewal of the Ulster Way in order to establish a well promoted, sustainable long distance quality walking route, long sections of which pass through scenically attractive forests. In East Antrim, this has also involved formal arrangements with Larne Borough Council in order to facilitate a section of the Ulster Way through Ballyboley Forest.

### **Environment: Funding for Farmers**

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding is paid to farmers to enhance the environment. (AQO 2258/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Agri-environment Schemes under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) are the main mechanism for enhancing the environment. Under the 2007 – 13 RDP some £219 million has been allocated to these Schemes.

### **Dioxin Scare: Exceptional Support Measure/State Aid Applications**

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the pork dioxin scare, to provide an update on the Exceptional Support Measure and State Aid applications. (AQO 2260/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** An application for an Exceptional Support Measure (ESM) was submitted, via Defra, to the Commission on 17 February. The purpose of the Exceptional Support Measure is to seek European Community authorisation and possible co-financing support for action to protect public health and provide the basis for the stabilisation and recovery of our beef and pigmeat markets.

The application is currently being progressed through official channels and we are in regular communication with Commission officials. We understand there are no substantive problems and it is anticipated that a favourable decision will be made in the near future. It is hoped to commence the Cull and Disposal of eligible cattle and meat product once EC approval is obtained.

Once the full decision of the ESM has been established we can apply for State Aid approval of any additional support measures for affected producers and processors.

### **Inheritance Tax on Conacre Land**

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the impact that changes in inheritance tax on conacre land will have on farming and rural communities. (AQO 2261/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** As you will be aware, this issue arises from a ruling in April 2008 on Inheritance Tax liability by the Special Commissioners and relates to a specific case where a farm with significant development potential was let entirely in conacre for a number of years prior to the death of the owner. An appeal recently launched through the Court of Appeal against this ruling has been unsuccessful. Further appeal may be possible. If the ruling continues to be upheld then the issue will be for farms who let land in conacre rather than active farm businesses. Moreover, it appears to relate only to conacre land with development potential rather than all conacre land. Consequently, the impact would seem to apply only in very specific circumstances.

Naturally, I would be extremely concerned at any decision which might threaten the viability of active family farm businesses which characterise our agricultural industry and lie at the heart of rural communities. I will continue to monitor developments with respect to this ruling.

### **EU Health Check**

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what recommendations she has put forward in relation to voluntary and compulsory modulation to the EU Health Check. (AQO 2262/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I had two main objectives on modulation in relation to the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Health Check. I wanted to see no increase in the total (EU + voluntary) modulation rates applied to our farmers as a result of the CAP Health Check when compared with previously announced rates. The substitution of voluntary modulation with EU compulsory modulation would also help align our total modulation rates closer to those in other EU Member States. Secondly, I wanted to ensure that this substitution would not disrupt our Rural Development Programme, which was a very real risk.

I am pleased to report that both these objectives were achieved. The total modulation rate applied to direct payments in the North of Ireland in the period 2009–2012 will remain unchanged from those previously announced and there will be no need to recast our Rural Development Programme.

### **Binevenagh Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty**

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what input her Department has had into the consultation on the future of the Binevenagh Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. (AQO 2264/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The new Binevenagh Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was designated in 2006, and in February 2008, at the request of NIEA, the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust set up the Binevenagh AONB Forum.

The Forum is tasked with the production of a co-ordinated strategy for the AONB. Countryside Management Branch is represented at the Forum.

### **Wind Turbines**

**Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her efforts to resolve issues in relation to wind turbines. (AQO 2265/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I am pleased to say that a provisional negotiated settlement was reached with the 11 Powerbreeze owners last month. All 11 owners have indicated that they will accept an ex-gratia payment from the Department, subject to a detailed written offer, and the details of this are currently being finalised. Part of this is receiving confirmation from owners in writing that they will accept the terms and conditions of the offer-this is awaited. However once received, I expect that the offer will be processed quickly and the money will be in the applicants' bank accounts at the end of the month. Given the protracted difficulties with this particular part of the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses Scheme I am pleased that a resolution has been found that I believe is fair and reasonable. The lessons learnt from our experience with this Scheme will inform our processes for future such schemes and programmes.

## DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

### Economic Downturn

**Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (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 5404/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell):** The Department has no quantitative evidence of the impact of the economic downturn on the culture, arts and leisure sectors but it is likely that the reduction in disposable income will impact negatively on general confidence in the sector. Further clarity on the impact will be available when the Arts Council of Northern Ireland General Population Survey results are published later in 2009.

While no changes have been made to existing policies and practices in direct response to addressing the effects of the economic downturn, my Department, through its arms length bodies, and subject to available resources, continues to promote and develop the culture, arts and leisure sectors, conscious of the important contribution that this sector can make to economic development, for example:

- the Arts Council is currently undertaking a multi-million pound arts infrastructure programme which will lead to the construction of new arts facilities of world class standards. This will make a significant contribution to Northern Ireland's cultural tourism; attracting visitors and investment to Northern Ireland;
- in addition the Arts Council is administering the Creative Industries Innovation Fund (£5m) over the next three years. The programme aims to deliver support to 140 Northern Ireland creative businesses over the period to March 2011; and
- initiatives undertaken by NI Screen continue to attract significant investment in the local economy through Film and Television. This has helped develop the Northern Ireland skills base and support local industry.

Finally, DCAL, through its arms length bodies, will continue to do all it can to ensure the delivery of its capital programme, within the shortest possible timeframe. Work is currently progressing or planned in the near future on a number of key projects with a combined project cost of over £90m.

### GAA

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list all the invitations he has received to attend GAA events, functions and games. (AQW 5451/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Since becoming Minister I have received one invitation to a GAA event. This event was the TG4 All Ireland Ladies Championship Finals in Croke Park in September 2008. I did however attend the official opening of St Brigid's GAC playing grounds on Saturday 13 September 2008 but the original invitation was addressed to my predecessor Edwin Poots MLA.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many employees in his Department travel from Derry/Londonderry to Belfast for work . (AQW 5523/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** There are no employees in my Department who travel from Londonderry to Belfast for work.

### Sports and Recreation Facilities

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the total capital grants awarded to each of the local councils in relation to providing new sports and recreation facilities, over the past 5 years. (AQW 5571/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), as part of its remit to develop the recreational potential of inland waterways administers an annual grant-aided Water Recreation Programme for which a total annual budget of up to £120k is available. This Programme is aimed at provision, in partnership, of new/improved water-based access/facilities, such as riverside paths and canoe trails for free public use. Over the past 5 years my Department has grant-aided 5 local council projects with total capital funding of £86,292 k for new water recreation facilities.

Under Measure 1.2a of the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure awarded capital grant of £191,708 towards one successful Council project to provide new angling and water recreation facilities.

The attached table details the capital funding awarded to each Council over the past 5 years from 2004 to date on new water recreation facilities.

	Water Recreation Development Programme				European Programme Funding
Council	2004/5 £	2005/6 £	2007/8 £	2008/9 £	2005/6 £
Antrim			11,292		
Ballymena				20,000	
Craigavon		10,000		25,000	
City Council of Londonderry					191,708
Lisburn	20,000				
<b>Total:</b>	<b>£20,000</b>	<b>£10,000</b>	<b>£11,292</b>	<b>£ 45,000</b>	<b>£191,708</b>

In addition to this, the Department of Social Development (DSD) through its Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group, provides capital grants for the development of new sports and recreation facilities. The following table details the capital funding awarded by DSD to each Council over the past 5 years from 2004 to date:

	Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group				
Council	2004/5 £	2005/6 £	2006/7 £	2007/8 £	2008/9 £
Armagh		308,845			
Ballymena		15,000	150,000		
Belfast			605,000	289,000	309,655
Coleraine					905,592

Council	Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group				
	2004/5 £	2005/6 £	2006/7 £	2007/8 £	2008/9 £
Craigavon					858,568
Down	59,000		304,435		233,187
Dungannon			95,960		150,000
Lisburn				252,605	46,208
City Council of Londonderry	74,000	64,000		459,500	101,500
Newry			260,266		
North Down		47,920			

### Sports and Recreation Facilities

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total capital grants awarded to each of the local councils for the refurbishment/modernisation/improvement of existing sports and leisure facilities, over the past 5 years. (AQW 5572/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), as part of its remit to develop the recreational potential of inland waterways administers an annual grant-aided Water Recreation Programme for which a total annual budget of up to £120k is available. This Programme is aimed at provision, in partnership, of new/improved water recreation facilities such as riverside paths and canoe trails, for free public use. Over the past 5 years my Department has grant-aided 10 local council projects with total funding of £177,132k for improving water recreation facilities.

Separately, under Measure 1.2a of the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure awarded grant of £326,630 towards 3 successful Council projects to develop existing (ie improving) angling and water recreation facilities.

The attached table details the capital funding awarded to each Council over the past 5 years from 2003/4 on improving water recreation facilities.

Council	Water Recreation Development Programme					European Programme Funding	
	2003/4 £	2005/6 £	2006/7 £	2007/8 £	2008/9 £	2004/5 £	2005/6 £
Ballymena			20,000				215,906
Ballymena					4,795		
Craigavon							91,824
Cookstown	40,000			11,350			
City Council of Londonderry				25,000			
Dungannon			25,000				
Fermanagh				20,000			
Larne				20,000			
Lisburn		10,687					
Londonderry							
Strabane						18,900	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>£40,000</b>	<b>£10,687</b>	<b>£45,000</b>	<b>£76,350</b>	<b>£4,795</b>	<b>£18,900</b>	<b>£307,730</b>

Sport Northern Ireland, which is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding, made one award of £38,627 from its Building Sport programme to Fermanagh District Council in 2006/07.

In addition to this, the Department of Social Development (DSD) through its Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group, provides capital grants for the development of new sports and recreation facilities. The following table details the capital funding awarded by DSD to each Council over the past 5 years from 2004 to date:

	Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group				
Council	2004/5 £	2005/6 £	2006/7 £	2007/8 £	2008/9 £
Ballymena			614,398		16,000
Belfast				355,635	
Coleraine		31,402			
Dungannon				80,000	
City Council of Londonderry		33,000	113,000	89,000	325,000
Newry			153,847	31,790	25,657
Omagh				38,800	6,727
Strabane		135,500	111,500	65,000	

### Ulster-Scots Projects

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many Ulster-Scots projects his Department has funded in the Lagan Valley constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5609/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Ulster-Scots Agency does not presently hold the requested information on a constituency basis. The Agency is currently reviewing its systems and procedures and as part of that I have asked the Agency to start capturing the information in this format from 1 April 2009.

The Agency can however provide detailed information pertaining to specific Ulster-Scots projects or events upon request.

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland has funded Ulster-Scots projects in the Lagan Valley Constituency over the past three years as detailed in the table below:-

2005/2006	£69,413.00
2006/2007	£70,010.00
2007/2008	£13,701.00

### Orange Culture

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what work he has undertaken to promote the Orange culture, and what funding has been provided. (AQW 5610/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Between 2005 and 2008 my department allocated approximately £30k annual funding for an Education Officer post and associated project costs in the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland (GOLI). The figure increased to £39k in 2008/09.

The objective of the funding was to help GOLI to develop confidence within its own community through increasing knowledge of the heritage and values of the Order and to foster greater awareness and understanding of Orange culture within the wider community.

Recently-funded projects include a Williamite Trail exhibition and map, and a 'Famous Orangemen' exhibition.

The Community Festivals Fund was established by DCAL in 2006 and the delivery of the fund was devolved to District Councils with effect from 1st April 2008. One of its aims of the fund is to enable community

organisations to celebrate their cultural identity. In the three years of operation the Fund has awarded almost £67,500 to 17 festivals organised directly by the Orange Order.

### Increasing the Usage of E-mail

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of e-mail. (AQW 5619/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** My Department, in accordance with its Waste Management Strategy, issues internal and external communication electronically where this is possible.

Furthermore, e-mail policy for the Northern Ireland Civil Service is currently under review by the Department of Finance and Personnel and will actively discourage staff from printing unnecessarily.

Guidance on the distribution of departmental publications and consultation documents, published in November 2008, states that there is a requirement to provide hard copies of documents to certain recipients including political representatives, parliamentary contacts and Legal Deposit and other libraries. The Guidance does, however, point out that organisations can, if they wish, choose not to receive hard copies of publications.

### Language Strategy

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what regard he will pay to the possible politicisation of Irish when bringing forward a paper to the Executive on a language strategy. (AQW 5637/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** This Strategy for Indigenous or Regional Minority Languages represents an opportunity to depoliticise the language issue in Northern Ireland.

I am keen that the Strategy will create the opportunity for an even handed approach to the indigenous or regional minority languages in Northern Ireland that will reduce and eliminate the disparity in funding between Irish and Ulster Scots.

### Language Strategy

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration he will give to the possible underfunding of Ulster-Scots when bringing forward a paper to the Executive on a language strategy. (AQW 5638/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I am committed to addressing the disparity in funding between Irish and Ulster-Scots.

Through the implementation of the Strategy for Indigenous or Regional Minority Languages it is my intention to ensure that the development of one language must be considered within the context of an equitable approach to the other.

### GAA

**Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide a list of (i) GAA clubs; (ii) GAA grounds; (iii) GAA competitions; and (iv) GAA trophies, that are named after members of Irish Republican terrorist organisations or those convicted of terrorist activity. (AQW 5671/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Department of Culture Arts and Leisure does not retain information on GAA clubs, grounds, competitions or trophies that are named after members of Irish Republican terrorist organisations or those convicted of terrorist activity. However, following a number of representations, I wrote to the GAA expressing my concern about this serious matter. I have also made clear that one of my major priorities as Sports Minister is to promote sport as a vehicle for improving community relations and community cohesion in Northern Ireland and that I fully expect all sports governing bodies, including the GAA, to do all they can to support these objectives. Linkages to terrorism, in whatever form, are not acceptable in society.

### Orange Order Based Projects

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many Orange Order based projects his Department has funded in the Lagan Valley constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5813/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** In the last three years my Department has funded 1 Orange Order based project in the Lagan Valley constituency.

The event was the Orangefest 2006 organised by Maghergall LOL. Funding for the event was provided from the Community Festivals Fund.

### Glenavy River

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his Department's involvement in the restocking of the Glenavy River with fish. (AQW 5853/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** DCAL received an application for a section 14 fish movement application from Glenavy Conservation and District Angling Club on 5 January 2009. The Department received confirmation from Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) that water quality assessments carried out confirmed that the water quality would sustain and support fish life.

Based on this information my officials granted approval for 500 1lb brown trout and 2,000 brown trout fry to be transported from Mairs Fish Farm in Crumlin to the Glenavy River for restocking purposes.

### Sport NI

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if the Minister is aware that the delay in Sport NI informing sporting bodies if they have received funding means some staff will have to be put on redundancy notice until funding is secured. (AQW 5960/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) has received 19 business cases from sports governing bodies seeking funding for the period 2009-2013. I am fully aware of the urgency in assessing these and providing decisions to the sports bodies. My officials are working closely with SNI to expedite the matter. Approvals, if appropriate, will issue at the earliest juncture to ensure that no staff within governing bodies are made subject to redundancy notices.

### Elite Facilities Programme

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, since the Elite Facilities Programme for gymnastics in Lisburn will not go ahead to stage 2 of the process, if he will consider funding stage one. (AQW 5961/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Funding will only be considered for those applicants chosen as preferred bidders, following Sport NI's assessment at Stage Two of the Elite Facilities Programme competition.

Only those applications which met the criteria for selection at Stage One of the competition were approved to proceed to Stage Two.

### 2012 Olympic Games: Events in Northern Ireland

**Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what London 2012 Olympic Games events are planned for Northern Ireland. (AQO 2267/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Northern Ireland will not host any London Olympic Games events in 2012. Except for football, the London Organising Committee were required to submit a compact venues portfolio which demonstrated that all other sporting events would take place as close to the Olympic Park as possible.

The International Olympic Committee requires football to be staged around the country in existing stadia. Northern Ireland was referred to in the bid book as being considered for staging football subject to completion of a new stadium.

### Sports Stadia

**Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions his Department has had with the three sporting codes in relation to the future international standard sports stadia. (AQO 2273/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Now that I have advised Executive colleagues of my views on the Maze stadium proposal I want to maintain the momentum and find a cost-effective, sustainable and equitable way of assisting football, rugby and gaelic games develop solutions to their stadia needs.

With this in mind I took an early opportunity to hold meetings with the Governing Bodies of football, rugby and gaelic games last month in order to explore options on future stadium provision. I explained to the Governing Bodies that I wanted them to return to me with a limited number of options for consideration. The Governing Bodies have undertaken to do this in the very near future.

### PRONI: Acquisition of Records

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) going on-line, to outline the policy and methods used by PRONI in the acquisition of new historical records. (AQO 2274/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland launched its electronic catalogue on the internet at the start of February 2009. It contains over 1 million catalogue entries and makes available the contents of PRONI's catalogues to a worldwide audience. Although the PRONI catalogue has gone on-line, the office continues to acquire historical records. A new PRONI Acquisition policy had recently been drafted. It sets out PRONI's legislative remit as the repository for selected official records from across the Northern Ireland public sector and privately-owned records relating to Northern Ireland. This wide remit is to ensure the selection of records for permanent preservation that reflect the history of Northern Ireland and its people. This includes records of political, economic, social, religious, educational, sports and cultural affairs at government, community and individual level.

Official records from across the NI public sector are selected using good records management practice to ensure that records of historical and research value are transferred to PRONI. Private records originate from a wide variety of sources – businesses, clubs, societies and charitable organisations, churches and faith groups, solicitors, landed estates, and private individuals whose contributions have impacted on life in Northern Ireland and beyond. The contents of such records are extremely varied and therefore PRONI officials must assess each potential deposit before it is accepted into the archives.

### Irish-Language Strategy

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the formulation of the Irish-Language Strategy and to outline which Irish-Language groups he has met in the last month in relation to this strategy. (AQO 2275/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I intend to present an initial scoping paper to the Executive Committee in the near future on my approach to the drafting of a Strategy for Indigenous or Regional Minority Languages.

When completed the strategy will protect, enhance and develop the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and the Irish-language and ensure that both languages are treated fairly with equal respect and recognition.

I have not met with any Irish-language groups in the last month however my officials and I have engaged with Foras na Gaeilge, Pobal and a delegation of the Irish Guild of the Church of Ireland in recent months on the Strategy and Irish-language issues.

### Loyal Orders: Cultural Contribution

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the cultural contribution made by the Loyal Orders. (AQO 2276/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I recognise the important role and contribution that the Loyal Orders provide to Northern Ireland society and to the preservation of our cultural heritage.

As I am sure the Member is aware, the Loyal Orders raise substantive funds for both local and national charities, and carry out important work in improving community relations.

The continuation and promotion of our cultural heritage, through the work of the Loyal Orders, is reflected in, for example:

- Twelfth of July celebrations, organised by the Orange Order, is recognised as one of the most significant cultural events in Northern Ireland, in terms of participants and audience;
- the significant efforts made by the Orange Order to promote the Twelfth of July celebrations as an inclusive family-friendly festival and as an opportunity to attract cultural tourism; and
- the role played by the Apprentice Boys of Derry in the development of the Maiden City Festival in Londonderry, which is a highly successful celebration of our cultural heritage and a major tourist attraction to the City.

Furthermore, my Department funds an Education Officer post in the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland. The role of the post holder is to raise awareness of the heritage and values of the Order in the wider community. The Officer has given presentations to Good Relations Officers in local Councils, to schools in the Catholic Maintained sector and to new recruits to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in order to help foster greater understanding of Orange Culture.

Gregory Campbell MP MLA

### Efficiency Savings: DCAL

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what efficiencies his Department has made in the current financial year. (AQO 2277/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** As part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, my Department has a target to deliver cash releasing efficiencies of £3.6m in this financial year. It planned to achieve this by reducing various budgets within the Department and the Department is currently living within these.

£400k of the total savings relate to Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland. Since this body has now moved into the Land and Property Services Agency, these savings will be delivered through that agency.

### Irish-Language Functions: Ministerial Attendance

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to attend Irish-Language functions. (AQO 2278/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I will consider any invitations to such events in accordance with my diary commitments.

### Lyric Theatre: Progress Report

**Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for a progress report on the Lyric Theatre site. (AQO 2279/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Lyric is one of a small number of the Department's strategic arts infrastructure projects. My officials have worked closely with the Lyric Theatre, Central Procurement Directorate, the Arts Council, and with other funders to progress this important project.

Detailed work on the design and costs of the new building has recently been completed and a Letter of Intent to the Contractor, Gilbert Ash, has been issued. Some further issues such as ensuring the necessary insurance requirements are in place are now being finalised.

I have announced just this morning that the Contractor will start work on site today, 9th March. I believe that the new Theatre will provide a much valued facility for audiences and artists alike and will make a significant contribution to our cultural offering.

My officials will continue to work closely with the Lyric Theatre to ensure this project is taken forward in a timely and cost effective manner.

### **2012 Olympic Games: Benefits for Northern Ireland**

**Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the benefits for Northern Ireland arising from the 2012 Olympic Games in London. (AQO 2280/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** My Department has created a strategy for maximising the benefits to Northern Ireland from the London 2012 Olympics and DCAL has responsibility for co-ordination. The strategy identifies benefits associated with the following themes: sport; culture; tourism; business; education; volunteering; and skills development. The anticipated benefits are: increased participation in sport, culture and volunteering especially among young people; increased economic activity through businesses winning 2012 contracts; increase in visitors through sports and cultural tourism.

### **Sporting Facilities: Upgrade**

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he will make an announcement on the upgrading of existing facilities for all the main sporting codes, within the timescale of the 2012 Olympic Games. (AQO 2281/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Sport NI is currently managing a range of funding programmes that aim in a cost effective manner to address the needs of all the main sporting codes, not just at representative and inter-county levels but to also address the deficit in facilities at the wider sub-regional level. As I have already indicated, in deferring major stadium expenditure, I will instead bring forward a number of other high priority Sports capital programmes, using at least part of the funding allocated to the stadium over the next 2 years, to support Sport more generally, including Football, Rugby and the GAA. All of this has the potential to provide upgraded facilities which could feature by 2012.

### **Creative Youth Partnerships**

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the level of support available from his Department to Creative Youth Partnerships. (AQO 2282/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Creative Youth Partnerships is a valuable programme, 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.

In the 2008/09 financial year, DCAL has provided Creative Youth Partnerships with £250k funding while the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has contributed a further £50k.

The Creative Youth Partnerships Steering Group has produced a business plan to mainstream the initiative and this is currently being considered by my officials in conjunction with colleagues in the Arts Council and the Department of Education. This is taking place in the context of the major structural changes occurring in the education sector including the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority. This process will inform decisions around the future funding of Creative Youth Partnerships. My officials are working with the Arts Council and Department of Education to consider possible funding for 2009/2010.

### Irish-Language Broadcast Fund

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the success and value of the Irish-Language Broadcast Fund. (AQO 2283/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** In 2004 the Government announced the establishment of an Irish-Language Broadcast Fund (ILBF) with a £12m allocation over a four year period from 2005/06 to 2008/09.

An interim evaluation of the ILBF, completed by Deloitte MCS Ltd in August 2007, found that the targets set for the ILBF in terms of production, broadcasting and training had been met.

A Post Project Evaluation is planned to take place after 31 March 2009 and I will be better able to assess value when that work is complete.

In the interests of parity, I am currently investigating the possibility of a similar fund for Ulster-Scots.

Gregory Campbell MP MLA

### Salmon Stock: Preservation

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has held any consultations with the Minister of the Environment in relation to the preservation of salmon stocks. (AQO 2284/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** There is ongoing liaison between officials from the two Departments on a range of salmon conservation issues in the context of the Habitats Directive, the Water Framework Directive and the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) convention.

### Sports Funding

**Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following his announcement on the proposed stadium at the Maze site, to outline how available funding will be divided between the three main sporting codes. (AQO 2285/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I have asked the Governing Bodies of the football, rugby and gaelic games to identify a short list of stadium development options. In the interim I intend to defer major stadium expenditure and instead bring forward a number of other high priority capital projects using some of the funding allocated to the stadium over the next two years.

## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

### Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education what the risks are for the schools who are proposing to set their own entrance examinations in Magherafelt and Ballymena; and what costs would they have to incur. (AQW 5448/09)

**The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane):** Sa treoir ar Aistriú 2010 a foilsíodh de bhun an ráitis a thug mé don Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009, déantar cur síos ar phríomhbhreithnithe áirithe do scoileanna dá leithéid mar mhaithe leis an bhaol atá ann go mbeidh mífhaidhmiú ann i dtaca leis an phróiseas aistrithe iar-bhunscoile a íoslaghdú.

The Transfer 2010 guidance published on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly describes certain key considerations for such schools in the interests of minimising the risk of dysfunction to the process of post-primary transfer.

- They should be very mindful of the need for a robust assessment mechanism capable of providing for sound ability-based admissions decisions;

- They should be aware that it would be their responsibility to ensure that parents have access to all the information they need in relation to any test;
- They should understand the critical importance of a special circumstances procedure to cater for claims that certain circumstances may have adversely impacted on a child's performance on the day a test was conducted;
- They should assume that they will need to make fair and robust decisions in respect of applicants who have not been able to sit a test or who can not be assessed fairly by such a test. In other words, they should consider a procedure akin to the special provisions procedure which existed in support of the Transfer Test.
- They should consider that the Department made the Transfer Test available in Irish in recognition that primary education is also delivered in Irish.

These issues are only illustrative of areas where schools may be challenged. The general point is that if there are weaknesses of this nature in the manner in which a school provides, administers and supports a test, then these weaknesses carry significant risks. They may incur financial liabilities through successful judicial challenge and fundamentally undermine a school's admissions decisions. These risks provide one of the reasons why the guidance does not recommend that schools attempt to use academic criteria.

If all schools adhere to the recommendations contained in the guidance, there will be no risk of dysfunctional processes, and we will lay the foundations of a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence.

### Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education to list the post-primary schools who have indicated that they will not go against her guidelines; and what percentage they make up of the post-primary sector. (AQW 5450/09)

**The Minister of Education:** I would expect the vast majority of post-primary schools to adhere to the recommendations in the Transfer 2010 guidance, however, individual schools are not required to formally notify me of their intentions.

Sa ráiteas ar Aistriú 2010 a thug mé don Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009 d'iarr mé go ndéanfadh gach iar-bhunscoil breithniú cúramach ar an Treoir ó mo Roinn ar Aistriú 2010 agus d'iarr mé orthu cloí leis na moltaí a dhéantar 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

### School Meals

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education how schools will ensure that applicants entitled to free school meals will gain admission at the same rate as all other applicants, under her recommendations for post-primary education. (AQW 5452/09)

**The Minister of Education:** The Transfer 2010 guidance recommends that, in relation to free school meals, 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.

Tá súil agam go gcloífidh gach scoil leis na moltaí seo mar mhaithe le córas a chruthú atá bunaithe ar cheartas sóisialta, ar chomhionannas agus ar shármhaitheas.

I hope that all schools will adhere to these recommendations in the interests of creating a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence.

### Bangor Academy

**Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Education to detail the implications of the collapse of Hocheiff (Ireland) Ltd for Bangor Academy. (AQW 5651/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl eolas ar bith ag an Roinn maidir le teip Hochtief (Ireland) Ltd. De réir dealraimh, ní bhaineann an conradh maidir le soláthar áiseanna agus seirbhísí chuig Bangor Academy le Hochtief (Ireland) Ltd.

The Department is not aware of a collapse of Hochtief (Ireland) Ltd. In any case the contract for the provision of facilities and services at Bangor Academy is not with Hochtief (Ireland) Ltd.

### **Educational Underachievement in Lagan Valley**

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to address the issue of educational underachievement among children in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 5718/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá mé ag cinntiú, trí chlár leasúcháin na Roinne, go bhfuil fócas soiléir ar chaighdeán san oideachas; ag dul i ngleic leis an bhac ar an fhoghlaím a bhíonn ag barraíocht daoine óga agus ag ísliú na bearna ghnóthachála.

Through the Department's reform programme, I am ensuring that there is a clear focus on standards in education; on tackling the barriers to learning that too many of our young people face; and on closing the achievement gap. I want to ensure that all schools and pupils, including those within the Lagan Valley constituency, receive the support and challenge necessary to raise standards.

The revised curriculum being introduced in all grant-aided schools is designed to support young people in acquiring not just the knowledge they need to succeed and do well in life and at work but also the skills they need to apply that knowledge. It will be supported with new assessment arrangements and by a new school improvement strategy, which is currently being finalised and is designed to ensure that every school maintains a clear focus on improvement.

There will also be a clear focus on improving attainment in literacy and numeracy through the revised literacy and numeracy strategy.

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.

Within our post-primary schools, the move towards an Entitlement Framework, which ensures that every young person has access to a much broader and better balanced range of courses and is supported with appropriate careers education, will help young people to succeed and gain qualifications in areas that interest them.

Additionally, action is being taken to address some of the barriers to learning that young people face – whether through disadvantage, through disability or because of other factors. A new policy for supporting Newcomer Children is currently being finalised and work is continuing to support the needs of children with disabilities, children from the Travelling Community and other young people who are at risk of underachievement.

The Extended Schools programme is also making a significant contribution to reducing differentials and improving the quality of life for children and young people particularly from disadvantaged areas. During the current financial year 19 schools within the Lagan Valley constituency have benefitted from almost £334k of Extended Schools funding which allows for the provision of a wide range of activities and services outside of the traditional school day.

Christ the Redeemer PS is also included in the £2m South Eastern Education and Library Board's Integrated Development Fund programme which seeks to raise educational achievement by initiating a number of new services and seeks to work in more integrated ways by building new and improved relationships between agencies, schools, parents, pupils, professionals and the local community.

### **School Pupils in North Down**

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Education how many pupils in (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools in the North Down constituency, have a first language other than English. (AQW 5833/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

**PUPILS WHO ARE RECORDED AS HAVING ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE (EAL) WHO ARE ATTENDING PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH DOWN CONSTITUENCY – 2008/09**

School type	Total No. of EAL pupils
Primary	99
Post-Primary	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>123</b>

**Source:** Annual school census.

**Notes:**

1. Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes
2. A child with English as an additional language is defined as one for whom English is not their first language and who has significant difficulty with the English language and requires assistance.

## Links Between Schools and Companies

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Education what programme is in place to develop stronger links between primary and secondary schools and companies. (AQW 5865/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá sé tábhachtach go mbíonn an deis ag daltaí ar gach leibhéal bheith ag plé le cúrsaí gnó agus leis an saol oibre, agus cuireann an curaclam athbhreithnithe, agus á rollú amach i ngach scoil dheontaschúnta, an deis seo ar fáil dóibh.

It is important that pupils at all levels have an opportunity to engage with business and with the world of work, and the revised curriculum, which is being rolled out across all grant-aided schools, now provides real opportunity for this to happen. From the earliest stages, children are now introduced to the world of work and given opportunities to learn about different careers and to begin to develop the skills they will need to do well in life and in work. In post-primary schools, Learning for Life and Work is a core statutory component of the revised curriculum and pupils have the opportunity to explore work in the local and global economy; to develop career decision-making skills; and to focus on enterprise and entrepreneurship.

It is also important though that pupils' experiences are broadened and, each year, the Department provides funding to a number of business education organisations who do excellent work in developing links between schools and businesses and in facilitating opportunities, for example, for both pupils and teachers to participate in work placements. We are committed to working through our business education partners and through business representative organisations to make sure that those opportunities are extended, particularly for young people who are at most risk of educational underachievement. I have met, for example, with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the IOD and the CBI to explore how best we can make sure that the connections between school and work are enhanced.

Additionally, my Department and the Department for Employment and Learning have begun the process of implementing the recently published Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance strategy, designed to support pupils in making career choices and decisions about their futures. The strategy will ensure that business-related issues such as employability and work related learning remain central themes.

## Children with Autism

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Education what summer schemes are available for children with Autism. (AQW 5870/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá tugtha le fios dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne go socráítear scéimeanna samraidh faoi láthair, cé nach bhfuil dhualgas reachtúil orthu soláthar speisialta scoileanna samhraidh a dhéanamh, do dhaltaí a fhreastlaíonn ar scoileanna speisialta, agus páistí a bhfuil uathachas acu san áireamh, agus gur minic a shocráítear iad i gcomhpháirtíocht le comhairlí áitiúla agus le hiontabhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that while Boards do not have a statutory duty to make specialist summer school provision they do currently arrange summer schemes, often in partnership with local councils and health and social services trusts, for pupils in special schools which includes those with Autism. In addition the Southern and Western Education and Library Boards have been working with MENCAP and Autism NI to submit a bid to the Big Lottery Fund to provide summer schemes for children with Autism. The outcome of this bid is currently awaited.

### Guidance Notes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education how much money was spent on guidance notes in Irish sent to parents of year six pupils, since 1 January 2009. (AQW 5876/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ba é costas aistriúchán Gaeilge na litreach agus an ábhair treorach a d'eisigh mé i mí Feabhra 2009 chuig tuismitheoirí gach páiste i Rang 6 maidir le hAistriú 2010 ná £545.15.

The cost of translating into Irish the letter and guidance material I issued in February 2009 to the parents of all P6 children on the issue of Transfer 2010 was £545.15.

### Catholic Certificate of Education

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education if she has discussed the removal of the Catholic Certificate of Education with the Department for Employment and Learning (AQW 5877/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní raibh plé agam go fóill leis an Roinn Fostaíochta agus Foghlama faoin teastas i staidéar ar reiligiún.

I have not yet discussed the certificate in religious studies with the Department for Employment and Learning.

However, the Department for Employment and Learning will be consulted during the review of current and future recruitment opportunities in the Teaching sector.

The Review will be completed by January 2010.

### Special Needs Pupils

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education how many places will be available for special needs pupils in the next term in the North Down area. (AQW 5878/09)

**The Minister of Education:** The special educational needs (SEN) framework does not include a system to set aside or make available specific SEN places for children in mainstream schools. Children with a statement of SEN and for whom a school is named in the Statement by an Education and Library Board (ELB) will be accepted by that school outside of the current enrolment figure. SEN children who do not have a statement will be enrolled in schools in the normal manner and their needs assessed and met in line with the current SEN framework.

Bíonn freagracht dhíreach ar ELBanna as páistí a chur i scoileanna speisialta agus déanfaidh siad é seo de réir riachtanas an pháiste, de réir mianta na dtuismitheoirí agus de réir na cóiríochta atá ar fáil sa scoil speisialta ag an am sin.

ELBs have direct responsibility for placing children in special schools and will do so in accordance with the needs of the child, the wishes of the parents and the accommodation available at that time in the special school.

### Newcomer Pupils

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education how much money was allocated to schools for each 'newcomer' pupil, per school year, and how this allocation is reviewed, monitored and evaluated. (AQW 5905/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Shonraigh daonáireamh Mheán Fómhair 2008 go raibh 6,995 dalta nua, a bhfuil Béarla mar theanga breise acu. Is meadú 23% é seo ar fhigiúirí na bliana roimhe.

The October 2008 census indicated that there were 6,995 newcomer pupils, who have English as an additional language. This is an increase of 23% on the previous year's figures.

The Common Funding Formula (CFF) is used to allocate funding direct to schools. Schools receive an additional 0.5 of the basic Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) cash value (£983.08 in 2008/09) for each full-time newcomer pupil 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 CFF.

Under Local Management of Schools arrangements, it is for the Principal and Board of Governors of each school to determine how their budgets are spent and to plan their use of resources to maximum effect, in accordance with their assessment of the needs and priorities of the school. Whilst, there is evidence from schools showing that they use their CFF funds in a variety of ways for the benefit of newcomer children, the Department has established a working group that will develop guidelines for Principals and Boards of Governors. These guidelines will detail good practice, specifically outlining how they should use their EAL CFF money to achieve the optimum support to newcomer children in schools. It is anticipated that these guidelines will be issued to all schools by the end of 2009.

Whilst funding to schools is vital, the support the Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS) provides to schools is also relevant. This regional service was established on 1 April 2007 and is operated by the five Education and Library Boards to support those schools with newcomer pupils who have EAL. In 2008/09 it received £1,015,000.

I have also taken action to ensure that Roma children, who face the double barriers of language and discrimination as a historically nomadic group, receive a fair and equal education. Additional funding is being provided to schools based on the current reported number of Roma children.

The funding provided to IDS has allowed a number of EAL support services to be established. These include diversity coordinators, a multi-lingual website, interpreting and translation services and a toolkit for primary-school teachers in Ireland.

My Department requested the Education and Training Inspectorate to conduct a survey of the support schools and the IDS are providing. The survey was completed at the end of 2008 and the report will be published soon.

It is planned to launch the policy 'Every School a Good School - Supporting Newcomer Pupils', in April 2009. The aim of this policy is to ensure that schools and Education and Library Boards are in a position to welcome newcomer pupils into their school communities. In particular, that they are able to support them in their acquisition of the language of instruction, whether it is English or Irish, to enable them to access the school curriculum and partake in every aspect of school life.

### Review of the Building Handbook

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education when the review of the building handbook will be completed and published. (AQW 5906/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Críochnaíodh athbhreithniú ar Lamhleabhar um Thógáil Foirgnimh Bunscoile le déanaí agus foilseofar an leagan athcheartaithe ar ball beag.

The review of the primary-school building handbook has recently been completed and the revised version will be published in the near future.

### Byron Review on Education

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Byron review on education. (AQW 5908/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá sé mar rún ag moltaí Athbhreithniú Byron paistí a choinneáil slán sábháilte sa domhan digiteach agus dá réir sin, téann siad thar na sainchúraimí a bhaineann go sonrach leis an earnáil oideachais.

The Byron review recommendations have as their intention to keep children safer in a digital world and as such extend beyond areas specific to the education sector.

The oversight of implementation of the recommendations here rests with the ministerial sub-committee on children and young people's safeguarding sub group which is chaired by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS).

The Department of Education is working closely with DHSSPS, and other Departments, to achieve improvement in the current arrangements around internet safety.

Proposals for any changes here in respect of e-safety within schools, the curriculum and capacity building with the school workforce will be referenced to both the north/south and English, Scottish and Welsh context.

The 'Better Education' working group is one of four which are to be established to deal with the full range of Byron report recommendations and the Department expects to have membership.

### Lagan College

**Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the current works at Lagan College and to provide a timetable for the completion of this project. (AQW 5923/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is cuid de chnuas-thionscadal i gComhpháirtíocht Phríobháideach Phoiblí (PPP) é Lagan College in éineacht le Tor Bank Special School, Dún Dónaill.

Lagan College is in a Public Private Partnerships (PPP) clustered project along with Tor Bank Special School, Dundonald. The PPP project is to extend and refurbish Lagan College and to provide a new school for Tor Bank Special School. There are remaining issues to be resolved before a preferred bidder can be appointed for this building project. The Department is working closely with those involved to allow the procurement process to move ahead.

You will be aware that I have reservations on the use of PFI/PPP as a procurement method. No new PPP/PFI projects have been announced by the Department since 2004.

### Killard House Special Needs Unit

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education what plans the South Eastern Education and Library Board has to move Killard House special needs unit to the Donaghadee High School site. (AQW 5931/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá tugtha le fios dom ag an SEELB go bhfuil siad ag fiosrú úsáidí eile don fhoirgneamh ag Donaghadee High School, agus gurb é athlonnú an aonaid ag Killard House a d'fhéadfadh a bheith i gceist mar úsáid amháin.

The SEELB has advised that it has been investigating alternative uses for the building at Donaghadee High School, one of which may be relocation of the unit at Killard House. A series of meetings are being held to gauge the opinion of various stakeholders, but no decision has yet been made.

### School Facilities in Strangford

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to upgrade school facilities in the Strangford constituency in 2009/10. (AQW 5992/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá dhá thionscadal i dtoghcheantar Loch Cuan atá cuimsithe i gClár Mór Oibreacha Chaipitil na Roinne .

There are two projects in the Strangford constituency included in my Department's Major Capital Works Programme. Planning of these is being taken forward and construction work is expected to start on site in the 2009/10 financial year. These are:-

Glastry College, Ballyhalbert – New School Building on an Extended Site.

Total Estimated Value - £12.5m

St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff – New School Building on Existing Site. Total Estimated Value - £5.4m

A number of potential minor works schemes have also been identified to improve facilities at the following schools. They may be progressed next year subject to resources being available.

School	Works description
St Finians Primary School, Newtownards	Toilet refurbishment Alterations to car park
St Patrick's Primary School, Ballygalget	Toilet refurbishment
St Mary's Primary School, Kircubbin	Upgrade of windows
St Columba's College, Portaferry	Refurbishment of Home Economics to include lift
Glenbrook Nursery	Indoor communal area, parents room, windows & kitchen
Abbey Primary	Lift installation
Derryboye Primary	Car park, including lease of land
Moneyrea Primary	Provision of new classroom and lobby extension
Kircubbin Integrated Primary	Provision of new Assembly Hall and classroom
Movilla High	Refurbishment of Home Economics rooms
Longstone Special	Refurbishment of 1 Home Economics room

### Composite Classes

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5184/09, (i) to name; (ii) to list all the classes; and (iii) to provide the number of pupils in primary schools where composite classes have been in existence in the Southern Education and Library Board, over the past five years. (AQW 5993/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá socraithe agam go gcuirfear an t-eolas i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

## DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

### Increasing the Usage of E-mail

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of e-mail. (AQW 5620/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** My Department actively promotes a range of measures to reduce the amount of paper documentation and increase the use of electronic communication as part of a green policy initiative which was introduced in March 2005.

Staff across the Department have been instructed to use e-mail wherever possible for both internal and external communications. This initiative has been adopted to reduce the amount of paper documentation produced and applies to general correspondence, consultation documents, reports, leaflets etc.

External customers are also encouraged to communicate with the Department through electronic means.

In addition and as part of the Northern Ireland Civil Service-wide Records NI Reform Project, the department uses an electronic document record management system called "TRIM". Since the implementation of TRIM, official records are held electronically and it is no longer necessary in most cases to create a paper record for preservation purposes, or store them in a registered file. Electronic records held on TRIM can be sent as an attachment via the e-mail system.

## Student Guidance

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what systems are in place to ensure that students are advised of potential growth employment markets and are guided into the appropriate further education or university courses to maximise their employment opportunities. (AQW 5705/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Careers Service has a key part to play in supporting the decision making process through the provision of effective guidance and up to date labour market information. The approach to the delivery of careers guidance is impartial and client centred and explores the skills, interests, experience and achievement of the individual together with labour market information relating to current and future opportunities and requirements.

All DEL's Careers Advisers are professionally qualified in the delivery of information, advice and guidance. Their knowledge and experience on potential growth employment markets is enhanced through attendance at Professional Development days. Close liaison with the Sector Skills Councils ensures access to accurate, up-to-date labour market information which enable clients make effective career decisions to maximise their future employment opportunities. Advisers also carry out individual research and regular employer visits.

Students are advised of potential growth employment markets through guidance interventions, departmental publications, careers conventions, exhibitions and media and marketing campaigns.

## Stranmillis College

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what investment there has been to upgrade the facilities at Stranmillis College in the last ten years. (AQW 5716/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** There has been a significant investment to upgrade the facilities at Stranmillis University College over the past ten years. In total since 1999/00 to the present, £12.1m of investment has taken place at the College. £11m of this has come from my Department and the College has contributed the remaining £1.1m.

The majority of this investment has been incurred on the Orchard project (£6.3m), Halls Heating Decentralisation (£2.1m) and in various works to comply with disability legislation (£1.5m). These three areas have accounted for £10m of the investment and the balance has been expended on a number of smaller projects.

## Catholic Certificate of Education

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has met or written to the Minister of Education about the Catholic Certificate of Education. (AQW 5717/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I can confirm that I have not met or written to the Minister of Education about the Catholic Certificate of Education.

## Individual Learner Programme

**Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made to introduce an individual learner programme for young people entering further education. (AQW 5754/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** A project is currently under way to pilot an Individual Learner Programme for 16 to 19 year olds entering further education colleges from September 2009. The pilot will include the guidance processes used by colleges, and how these can be supported by technology. Ultimately, the aim is to provide 16 to 19 year olds entering an FE college with a personalised programme of learning that would enable his/her career aspirations to be met in the most effective way.

## Further Education Colleges

**Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give an update on the pay agreement of the National Joint Council (NJC) for non-teaching staff in further education colleges. (AQW 5987/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In October 2008, a National Joint Council (NJC) pay increase of 2.45% to non-teaching staff in Further Education (FE) Colleges was agreed. This increase is effective from April 2008. Additionally, following an arbitration award at national level in March 2009, a further 0.3% on top of the 2.45% is expected to be paid to non-teaching staff from April 2008. The implementation of this pay increase is subject to an approval process in accordance with the public sector pay policy adopted by the Executive. The terms under which the pay agreement will be applied, and its associated business case, are currently being prepared by FE College employers in consultation with my Department. That work should be completed within the next two weeks. The proposals, when finalised, will be submitted to the Department of Finance & Personnel (DFP) for approval. The increase will be paid once that approval process has been completed.

## DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

### Executive-Led Trade Missions

**Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of investment and the number of new jobs created and filled in the last twelve months as a direct result of Executive led trade missions to the United States of America. (AQW 5570/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster):** In the last twelve months, there was one Executive led trade mission to the United States of America organised by Invest NI. The primary objective of the trade mission was to develop trade and export opportunities for Northern Ireland companies. In October 2008, I led 15 companies to Boston and Silicon Valley. As part of the follow-up to the USNI Conference, I attended a number of meetings with client contacts. However, to-date there have been no foreign direct investments or new jobs created in Northern Ireland as a direct result of this visit.

### Electricity Grid Network

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what consideration has been given to strengthening the electricity grid network to allow for the exploitation of wave energy potential off the Antrim coast. (AQW 5731/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** In light of conclusions from the Grid Study completed in late 2007, the Department has engaged with Northern Ireland Electricity as grid owner, and the Utility Regulator, to consider where, and how, the electricity grid in Northern Ireland could be strengthened to accept a much higher proportion of renewable power generation.

While it is likely that most of any additional renewable generation will be from on-shore wind, any grid development proposals will include consideration of the potential for ocean energy, including wave and tidal stream, and offshore wind.

The Department is already considering the environmental implications of the development of marine renewables and off-shore wind energy through a Strategic Environmental Assessment.

### Waste Management

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what funding and support is available to encourage businesses to manage waste and become more energy efficient. (AQW 5801/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI funds three external delivery organisations to provide resource efficiency support to businesses in Northern Ireland and agrees the work programme of each of these organisations (The Carbon Trust, Envirowise and the National Industrial Symbiosis Programme) to ensure locally focused delivery of these national resource efficiency programmes. Financial support of these programmes amounts to £5.9 million in 2008/2009.

Best practice solutions to waste management and sustainable energy including energy efficiency can be provided by the delivery organisations through site visits and follow-up reports, dedicated help lines, free

literature, technical seminars and training. An interest free loan is also available for sustainable energy projects that meet particular carbon saving and cost criteria.

In addition Invest NI's Sustainable Development Team delivers a further support programme dedicated to providing sustainable development consultancy support. Site visits, advice and information on sustainable energy solutions are also available from in-house experts where this is appropriate.

Invest NI's [nibusinessinfo.co.uk](http://nibusinessinfo.co.uk) website provides guidance and signposting in the resource efficiency arena.

### LEDU Staff

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what protection will be given to former LEDU staff if the company to which their pensions are transferred ceases to trade. (AQW 5885/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The Trustees of the LEDU Retirement and Death Benefits Plan are under an obligation to act in the best interests of all the members of the Plan. In fulfilling this duty, the Trustees, prior to purchasing any insurance policies, will satisfy themselves as to the financial strength of the insurance company.

In the event that the Plan is wound up, the Plan would cease to exist and the Trustees and DETI, as the former Principal Employer under the Plan, would be discharged from their duties. As all members' benefits would have been transferred to an insurance company, the insurance company would become responsible for the payment of members' benefits. Should problems occur in the future with the insurance company, members would only have recourse to the insurance company.

All insurance companies are, however, governed and regulated by the Financial Services Authority and are required to maintain, at all times, statutory reserves that are sufficient to enable them to honour their guaranteed liabilities. In addition a compensation fund, the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, exists to provide compensation to insurance company policyholders where an insurance company becomes insolvent and their liabilities are not bought over by another company. This compensation is subject to a 90% limit.

### LEDU Staff

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she will consider delaying the decision to transfer the LEDU pension fund to an insurance company. (AQW 5886/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The decision to wind up the LEDU Retirement and Death Benefits Plan rests with the Trustees of the Plan and was communicated to members on 6 October 2008.

Wind up of any pension scheme tends to be a rather lengthy process and the timing of the transfer of the fund to the preferred insurance company will be discussed at a full meeting of the Trustees. The Trustees will take expert advice into account and only after due diligence will the transfer of funds take place.

### Northern Ireland Electricity

**Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if Northern Ireland Electricity intends to re-open funding for the 'Insulation Measures only' schemes, in the Antrim Borough Council area. (AQW 5946/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** NIE Energy has confirmed that they do not currently intend to re-open funding for their 'Individual Measures- Insulation' scheme, however they do plan, through the Energy Efficiency Levy Programme, to run several energy saving schemes once again from April 2009. One of the potential schemes, available to vulnerable householders and similar to the 'Individual Measures only' scheme, will pay for household insulation to be installed in privately owned or rented homes. Another scheme will give cashback to privately owned or rented (non-vulnerable) householders when they install insulation. Specific eligibility criteria for these schemes have yet to be confirmed.

All proposed Energy Efficiency Programme schemes are currently under review and will be subject to approval by the Energy Saving Trust and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation.

### Invest NI

**Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the area of Invest NI land that was sold to new and existing clients during the last three years. (AQW 5969/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** In the three years from April 2006 to March 2009, Invest NI has sold 208 acres of land to its client companies.

60 clients made first time purchases totalling 182 acres, while 14 clients purchased 26 acres of additional land for expansion projects.

The provision of high-quality serviced sites for industrial development at strategic locations across Northern Ireland is a key goal of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. Invest NI has a target to acquire and/or develop an additional 200 acres of land by 2012.

Serviced sites are provided to client companies with an identifiable and viable development project in locations where there is clear evidence of market failure.

### New Businesses

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what advice and help are available for individuals wanting to start up new businesses. (AQW 6015/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI have developed the new Enterprise Development Programmes to replace the current Start a Business Programme.

Starting in April, these programmes will provide continuous support for those at different stages of setting up a business. This includes a range of targeted initiatives to help those at Pre-Start to progress their confidence and business idea. For those at the Start-Up stage, this support offers a range of workshops and seminars, flexible to the needs of the client, as well as tailored one to one mentor support for those with real growth potential.

The focus will be on building the skills and capabilities of the entrepreneur and in ensuring that those businesses capable of making a significant economic impact receive appropriate support. With its enhanced mentoring and follow-on support through the early stages of growth, the new programmes will provide a firmer foundation on which success can be built.

In addition to the programme, applicants will also be referred to other relevant sources of support such as online resources for information and partner organisations such as Advantage, Princes Trust, DARD and local councils.

### Invest NI

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the investment made by Invest NI in the North West Action Plan (NWAP) phase 1 and 2. (AQW 6144/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The first phase of the Invest NI's North West Action Plan (NWAP) was successfully implemented during the period April 2003 – March 2006. It was initially developed in response to a series of significant job losses and closures in the textile sector in the North West. It focused largely on addressing capital / infrastructural issues and the total Invest NI investment in the period was £80 million against a target of £60 million.

Whilst Invest NI continued to make significant investments in the North West in the period April 2006 – March 2008, including a number of substantial Foreign Direct Investment projects, there was a change in focus for NWAP Phase II. This was driven by a need to consolidate and facilitate the utilisation of some of the capital and infrastructural investments under NWAP Phase I in a changing economic environment. A series of specific joint initiatives were developed with the North West Councils aimed at addressing capability weaknesses within SMEs throughout the region. The total investment in these initiatives was almost £300,000 over a two year period, of which Invest NI contributed £100,000.

## Invest NI

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much will be invested by Invest NI in North West Action Plan Phase 3. (AQW 6145/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI continues to be committed to working in partnership with local stakeholders in the north-west and is actively investing in relevant projects in the region in line with its current corporate plan.

No decision has yet been made in relation to a formal north-west action plan phase 3 and this is due to a number of factors including:

- The desire of the original council partners (Londonderry, Strabane, Coleraine, Limavady and Magherafelt) to move away from this traditional grouping and begin to develop new partnerships within the context of the new review of public administration council clusters.
- The significant European funding now available via the Interreg, rural development and DETI competitiveness and employment programmes.
- The role of the North-West Gateway Initiative in providing a framework for future investment in the wider north-west region.

Invest NI will continue to engage with councils in the north-west to explore the most appropriate mechanism for the delivery of all relevant joint projects and initiatives.

## Invest NI

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much was invested in the virtual cross-border business park by Invest NI and the Irish Development Agency. (AQW 6148/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The virtual cross-border business park is now known as the North-West Business Technology Zone (NWB TZ). NWB TZ is a flagship cross-border collaboration between Invest NI and the IDA. It includes high specification property provision in both Letterkenny and Londonderry, improved cross-border telecommunications and IT linkages, and a skills development programme all supported by promotional materials to market the Zone to external and internal investors.

The total investment in the NWB TZ is circa £39 million, which includes public and private sector contributions. The investment in Northern Ireland is £17.4 million. Invest NI's contributed £6.75 million and IDA's contribution was £8.4 million.

## Cross-Border Business Park

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether there will be another phase of the cross-border business park, and if not, to detail the reasons why this will not take place. (AQW 6149/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** All elements of the cross-border business park, now known as the North West Business Technology (NWB TZ), are now in place and they include the North-West Business Complex, the speculative build at Timberquay and the Academic Business and Clinical Research and Innovation Facility (Clinical Translational Research and Innovation Centre) facility at Altnagelvin hospital.

We are now entering a period of consolidation with regard to the various properties and the priority for the relevant project promoters is to maximise the capacity of their facilities and progress towards the achievement of the key targets and milestones set out in the original proposals.

In addition, there are a number of other public and private sector developments proposed for the city which will have synergy with, and compliment, the activities of the current NWB TZ.

Any future investment will have be considered in the context of the progress of the current NWB TZ project and any other relevant infrastructure projects being proposed to ensure that there is not oversupply leading to potential displacement, particularly of private sector investment. Therefore, there are no immediate plans for a NWB TZ Phase 2 but the IDA/Invest NI Working Group continues to meet with a view to identifying further initiatives which may be suitable for support as part of the NWB TZ.

## Invest NI

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why Invest NI has withdrawn (i) a Managing Director; (ii) an International Sales Manager; and (iii) the North West Initiatives Team, from Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 6152/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** At no time has there been an Invest NI Managing Director based in the North West.

A member of Invest NI's International Marketing staff, although based in Belfast, was, for personal reasons, temporarily permitted to work out of the agency's North West Regional Office.

Invest NI has not withdrawn any resources from the North West Initiative team, which is still in place and operating from the North West Regional Office.

## DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

### ERINI Report

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of the Environment for his 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 5697/09)

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** I fully concur with the remarks made by the Finance Minister on this matter.

It is my understanding that this ERINI report was commissioned by an Assembly Committee and not the Executive. It certainly has not been circulated to Executive Ministers for consideration.

### Planning Applications

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment what action is being taken to speed up the process of smaller scale planning applications. (AQW 5748/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Following a successful pilot with Derry District Council and Limavady Borough Council, my Department is now rolling out a streamlined consultation scheme with a further 22 Councils.

Streamlining benefits all stakeholders in the planning process allowing decisions on non-contentious planning to be issued without formal presentation to Council on a monthly basis. Instead a weekly list of streamlined applications received by my Department will be provided to the Council. As a safeguard to the system the Council or Divisional Planning Manager has the right formally to refer an application to the Council for consideration.

The pilot scheme has an immediate impact accelerating the processing of all planning applications in the Derry City Council area by allowing a decision to be reached and issued quickly on non-contentious planning applications particularly those applications relating to small and medium sized business enterprises.

Other measures are taken by my Department to expedite the processing of certain applications such as those on which grant-aid may depend and certain commercial, industrial and social infrastructure proposals with a clear strategic, employment, community or public interest dimension such as social housing applications.

### Enforcement Action Notices

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW4231/09, for details of, and a timescale for, the clearance of outstanding enforcement actions, especially those that have been with his Department for a period of between 18 – 24 months. (AQW 5749/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** In response, I would like to make 2 points: firstly the number of new cases is of course beyond the control of my Department; and secondly it is difficult to be specific on the anticipated timescales that will be required to resolve outstanding enforcement cases due to their complex nature, some of which may be linked to current planning applications. That said the Department continues to examine current cases on an ongoing basis with a view to prioritising the oldest for action, those between 18-24 months and resolving the more straight forward cases. This is beginning to be effective as witnessed by the number of cases resolved through our enforcement schedules and the halt in the rise of live cases.

### Water Pollution Offences

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4007/09, to detail (i) the number and, nature of; and (ii) what action his Department took on alleged pollution incidents by (a) Antrim Borough Council (b) Belfast International Airport (c) Coca Cola (d) DARD Rivers Agency (e) DARD Forestry Service (f) Farran's Construction (g) Lisburn City Council (h) Moy Park Ltd (i) O'Kane Foods (j) Radox Laboratories; and (k) Stoneyford Concrete, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5765/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** A total of 53 pollutions incidents have been recorded by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency as attributable to the eleven bodies listed in the question over a five year period from 2003 to 2007. The table appended to this answer lists the 11 named alleged offenders and also summarises the total number of pollution incidents attributed to each, the years in which the incidents occurred, the type/category of the pollution, and the severity category of the incidents. It also indicates where warning letters were issued and where prosecutions were taken.

Name	Total No Incidents	Year	Category	Explanation of Terms	High severity	Medium severity	Low severity	Warning Letters	Prosecutions	Court Outcomes
Antrim Council	2	2003	Chemical		0	0	1			
		2005	Oil		0	0	1			
Belfast Int Airport	2	2007	Chemical		0	0	2			
Coca Cola	4	2004	Chemical		0	0	2	1		
		2005	Oil		0	0	1			
		2007	Chemical		0	0	1			
Radox	2	2006	Chemical		0	0	1			
		2007	Sewage		0	0	1			
Stoneyford Concrete	2	2003	Non Agric Waste Discharge	Dirty Water from a cement Mixer	0	0	1			
		2007	Other	Concrete Washings into watercourse	0	0	1			
Moy Park	2	2006	Oil		0	0	1	1		
		2006	Other	Dirty Water discharging into watercourse	0	1	0		1	Fine (£6000)
O'Kane Foods	2	2007	Oil		0	0	1			
		2007	Oil		0	0	1			

Name	Total No Incidents	Year	Category	Explanation of Terms	High severity	Medium severity	Low severity	Warning Letters	Prosecutions	Court Outcomes
Lisburn City Council	2	2003	Oil		0	0	1			
		2004	Non Agric Waste Discharge	Dirty Water from a landfill	0	1	0			
Farrans Construction	15	2003	Non Agric Waste Discharge	Run-off, dirty water, from a construction site	0	0	1			
		2004	Other	Cloudy water entering watercourse.	1	1	4		1	Dismissed
		2004	Non Agric Waste Discharge	Cloudy water entering watercourse.	0	0	1			
		2005	Other	Cloudy water entering watercourse.	0	1	4	1		
		2005	Non Agric Waste Discharge	Dirty Water from construction Site	0	1	0		1	Dismissed
		2006	Oil		0		1			
DARD Rivers Agency	18	2003	Other	Suspended solids cement washings	0	1	2			
		2004	Other	Suspended solids, cement washings	0	0	4			
		2005	Other	suspended solids, cement washings	0	2	4			
		2006	Other	suspended solids, cement washings	0	0	3			
		2007	Other	suspended solids, cement washings	0	0	1			
		2007	Oil		0	0	1			
DARD Forestry Service	2	2005	Oil		0	1	0			
		2007	Other	Suspended solids	0	0	1			

## Protection of Marine Life

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment what his department has done to protect marine life.

(AQW 5770/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department has designated a number of marine areas for species and habitats of conservation concern under the Habitats and Birds Directives. These areas include Strangford Lough, Murlough Bay and Rathlin Island. Other areas are being considered for designation.

My Department also protects marine life by responding to pollution incidents, monitoring the chemical and biological quality of the aquatic environment and through the regulation of effluent discharges.

## Planning Applications

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications have been processed through the streamlined process introduced in January 2009.

(AQW 5787/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The streamlining of planning applications was introduced by my Department as a pilot project with Derry City Council in December 2007 and was extended to Limavady Borough Council in June 2008. Following the success of the pilot the scheme was extended a further 22 Councils in January 2009. As Planning Service Development Management Statistics are produced on a quarterly basis, figures have not yet been published for the period since January 2009.

However, from 3 December 2007 to 30 September 2009 there were 353 streamlined applications processed and approved in the Derry City Council and Limavady Borough Council areas. Figures for 1st October 2008 to 31st December 2008 will be available from 20th March 2009.

## Strategic Projects Unit

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications have been received by the Strategic Projects Unit since its creation and the average time it has taken to reach a determination.

(AQW 5795/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Programme for Government refers to a six month target being applied for the processing of large scale development proposals. These are proposals which are considered to have significant economic or social implications for the whole or a substantial part of Northern Ireland. In response to this, the Planning Service created 2 Strategic Project teams at Headquarters in October 2007 specifically to process these types of applications. This also includes facilitating pre-application discussions (PADs).

PADs were formally introduced in December 2007 and the 2 teams are currently dealing with 29 proposals in the pre-application discussion stage.

At the time the teams were formally established, they were required to complete the processing of a number of applications already in the system. Some were longstanding and therefore had lengthy processing times. The teams are currently processing 60 Article 31 cases and a further 36 major applications.

Since the creation of the teams, 6 applications have been processed to a decision or recommendation to the Minister in line with the PfG target with an average timescale of 6.3 months.

## Renewable Energy and Waste Management Facilities

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the criteria for installing renewable energy and waste management facilities for businesses in rural and urban areas.

(AQW 5800/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Proposals for renewable energy and waste management facilities attaching to existing business activities are considered on their individual planning merits. In many cases these works would not require the grant of planning permission. Where planning permission is required, proposals would be judged against the provisions contained in the area plan and in the light of all material planning considerations.

Specifically Planning Service has recently introduced draft Planning Policy Statement 18 Renewable Energy which aims to encourage the greater use of small scale renewable energy technologies. Similar planning policy guidance for waste management, Planning Policy Statement 11 Planning and Waste Management, provides a framework for determining waste management proposals.

### Wind Turbines

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department has plans to offer incentives to farmers and landowners, who own or install wind turbines, to help meet the European Union's Renewable Directive Targets for 2020. (AQW 5825/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department has no such plans. Whilst my Department provides planning policy guidance on renewables, renewable energy policy in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

### NI Environment Agency

**Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the obligatory 'Right of Entry' process which the NI Environment Agency officials must adhere to prior to entering a holding for inspection purposes. (AQW 5848/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Where it forms part of their particular duties, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) staff can be authorised to enter premises when implementing or enforcing legislation that is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment.

The legislation specifies the circumstances in which an authorised officer can enter premises (which may include land, vehicles, vessels and residential premises) in the exercise of their statutory role.

Most legislation specifies that authorised officers must produce evidence of their authorisation on request. Some legislation requires that prior notice should be given to the owner or occupier of the premises concerned.

### Driver and Vehicle Agency

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment why the Driver and Vehicle Agency does not send out information about fees with Driving Licence Renewal forms. (AQW 5898/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The fees associated with the administration of driver licensing are based on a system of cost-recovery and the fees are reviewed and, where necessary, amended, on a regular basis. If the Driver & Vehicle Agency were to print fees on the application forms or any accompanying leaflet it would mean that the forms or leaflets would have to be reprinted on each fee change. It would also mean batches of application forms/leaflets held elsewhere, such as at post offices, would have to be recalled. In order to avoid these costs and to limit confusion regarding fees at the period of transition from one fee to another, it has been decided to remove reference to specific fees from all DVA driver licensing forms. Up to date information on fees is available on the DVA website or from DVA customer services.

### Recycling Packaging

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment if he would consider making supermarkets more responsible for recycling packaging. (AQW 5899/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** 60% of Commercial and Industrial Waste is to be recycled by 2020. This non-statutory target is set out in the NI Waste Management Strategy 2006-2020 and applies to NI as a whole.

However, the revised European Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC) came into force on 12 December 2008 and is due to be transposed into national law by 12 December 2010. It includes the following statutory recycling target:

- by 2020, the preparing for re-use and the recycling of waste materials such as at least paper, metal, plastic and glass from households and possibly from other origins as far as these waste streams are similar to waste from households, shall be increased to a minimum of overall 50% by weight

The Department is awaiting clarification on whether this target includes waste from commercial premises where it is similar to household waste. If this turns out to be the case the target contained in the Directive will supersede the current non-statutory targets in the NI Waste Management Strategy.

My Department will continue to work with businesses to help them achieve these targets through its work with the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) and a new Waste Communications Strategy as outlined in my answer to your recent question on reducing the amount of packaging (AQW 5531/09).

### Craigavon Area Plan 2010

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of the Environment when the Craigavon Area Plan 2010 will be reviewed.

(AQW 5940/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Department does not propose to review the Craigavon Area Plan 2010 in advance of the new district councils assuming plan making powers under the Review of Public Administration in 2011.

The Department has carried out a review of Housing lands in Craigavon and discussed its findings with Craigavon Borough Council. This review indicates there is sufficient remaining land within the range of settlements across Craigavon Borough (both zoned phase 1 land and committed unzoned land) to provide for almost 10,000 dwellings. This represents sufficient land supply to meet housing need to 2015 and beyond. The Department does not therefore propose to release any phase II land for development in advance of the new district councils assuming plan making powers under the Review of Public Administration in 2011.

### Craigavon Area Plan 2010

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of the Environment when the land zoned as phase II in the Craigavon Area Plan 2010 will be released for development.

(AQW 5941/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Department does not propose to review the Craigavon Area Plan 2010 in advance of the new district councils assuming plan making powers under the Review of Public Administration in 2011.

The Department has carried out a review of Housing lands in Craigavon and discussed its findings with Craigavon Borough Council. This review indicates there is sufficient remaining land within the range of settlements across Craigavon Borough (both zoned phase 1 land and committed unzoned land) to provide for almost 10,000 dwellings. This represents sufficient land supply to meet housing need to 2015 and beyond. The Department does not therefore propose to release any phase II land for development in advance of the new district councils assuming plan making powers under the Review of Public Administration in 2011.

### River Pollution

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of the Environment how many (i) enforcement notices have been issued; and (ii) actions have been taken, by his Department against river pollution, in each of the last 3 years, in the Upper Bann constituency.

(AQW 5942/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Where water pollution occurs, it is the policy of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to take formal enforcement action if this is warranted by the severity of the pollution and the circumstances which led to it occurring.

The formal enforcement options available to NIEA in water pollution cases include:

- the issuing of an enforcement warning letter, or;
- the initiation of prosecution proceedings, and / or;
- the issuing of a Water Order Notice.

Table A details the number of substantiated pollution incidents and the number of Enforcement Notices issued under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in each of the last 3 years in the Upper Bann catchment area. Table B details the actions and outcomes to date.

**TABLE A – SUBSTANTIATED POLLUTION INCIDENTS AND WATER ORDER ENFORCEMENT NOTICES.**

	High Severity	Medium Severity	Low Severity	Enforcement Notices
2006	1	16	35	0
2007	2	4	62	0
2008	4	13	48	2

**TABLE B – ACTIONS TAKEN AND OUTCOMES (AT 9 MARCH 2009)**

	Cases referred to the Public Prosecution Service	Convictions	Cases Pending	Warning Letters Issued
2006	6	6	0	11
2007	3	2	1	16
2008	3	1	2	6

## Planning Policy Statement 2: Planning and Nature Conservation

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in updating Planning Policy Statement 2 - Planning and Nature Conservation. (AQW 5962/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Significant progress has been made in updating Planning Policy Statement 2 – Planning and Nature Conservation and I anticipate publishing a draft for public consultation in the spring.

## River Pollution

**Ms Ni Chuilín** asked the Minister of the Environment if he plans to bring forward legislation about people who illegally dump waste and if he has had any discussions with the PPS to increase fines and deterrents for polluting rivers and the environment. (AQW 6047/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department has recently acted to increase the penalties for the illegal deposit of waste on land. The Waste (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 provided powers for the courts to impose more significant custodial sentences and financial penalties for waste offences. The maximum fine in the Magistrates Court was increased from £20,000 to £50,000 and the maximum prison sentence in the Crown Court was increased from 2 years to 5 years. As a further deterrent to such illegal activity, courts were also granted wider powers to require convicted offenders to pay investigation, enforcement and clean-up costs and to award the Department possession of vehicles used in the commission of illegal waste offences.

In addition, my Department will consult shortly on a range of measures designed to further strengthen the enforcement framework for the illegal deposit of waste on land. Depending upon the outcome of the consultation process, I anticipate that a number of the proposals will be included either in a Waste Bill or in other appropriate primary legislation.

At this point in time I have no plans to make further legislative changes to the fines and deterrents for polluting rivers and the environment. I can also confirm that in previous discussions with PPS, my officials were advised that sentencing is entirely a matter for the courts to judge.

## Graduated Drivers Licensing

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to have a consultation on Graduated Drivers Licensing, and if so, when this will occur. (AQW 6074/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My main priority at present is the issue of drink driving, which is relevant to all drivers including learners and novices, and my Department will shortly be issuing a public consultation on proposals to reduce blood alcohol limits. I also intend to consider the outcome of the recent UK-wide consultation on “Learning to Drive” before deciding on the next steps in relation to driver training, testing and licensing in Northern Ireland. I have decided not to proceed at present with other aspects of graduated driver licensing.

## Road Safety Council

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the future plans for road safety committees in the light of his decision to cease funding for the Road Safety Council. (AQW 6118/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Following a critical review of its performance, I wrote to the Road Safety Council (RSC) on 9 December 2008 to inform it of my decision to channel funding not into central administration but direct to local committees.

The future of road safety committees, as part of an independent and voluntary movement, is very much in their own hands. It is my intention that front-line road safety activities should continue, and that is why I have asked officials to put in place a new funding model for the period from 1 April 2009. Local committees have been provided with a simple application form, and the Department is waiting to receive their bids for funds for the new financial year.

## DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

### Workplace 2010 Project

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to list all the companies including consultancy companies, that have been involved in the Workplace 2010 project; and (ii) to detail how much each company has been paid. (AQW 5514/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds):** Details given in this answer relate to the Workplace 2010 PFI procurement process. In the main they exclude expenditure managed by the Department in relation to capital and operational costs of NICS accommodation outside the PFI procurement.

The workplace 2010 procurement was an extensive procurement project that ran for four years and involved hundreds of suppliers. The table below lists all companies that received over £25k (in total over the 4 years of the procurement process) for primarily procurement related work, however the figures shown may include some other payments that the same companies received in relation to non-procurement activities during the same period.

**COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PARTENAIRE LEGAL CHALLENGE ARE INCLUDED IN THE FIGURES PRESENTED.**

<b>Consultancy Consortium *</b>	<b>5,286,630</b>
Lovells LLP ***	2,581,499
Deloitte**	708,865
Hamilton Architects	439,014
Drivers Jonas **	286,600
DEGW **	248,859
Partenaire Limited	225,000
DSG Retail Limited	160,780

<b>Consultancy Consortium *</b>	<b>5,286,630</b>
Gleeds**	157,311
Future @ Work	114,889
Grafton Recruitment Ltd (for temporary staff)	113,159
Pentagon Solutions	95,649
Osborne King **	75,420
EC Harris LLP	68,587
Dargan Press Ltd The	56,405
A V Browne	43,422
Wallace Douglas	40,419
Partnership UK	33,299
Addleshaw Goddard	32,224
UUTech Ltd	30,000
Charles Bell Ltd	27,384
PA Consulting Group	26,924

\* Consultancy Consortium appointed to provide financial, technical and commercial support to the Workplace 2010 PFI procurement process. The Consortium consisted of Deloitte, Drivers Jonas, Gleeds, DEGW and Osborne King.

\*\* Additional payments for work undertaken by these companies outside the terms of the contract with the Consultancy Consortium.

\*\*\* Includes payments of £148k to L'Estrange & Brett

## Capital Expenditure

**Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the anticipated (i) net; and (ii) gross capital expenditure for the financial years (a) 2008/09; (b) 2009/10; and (c) 2010/11. (AQW 5539/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The latest available Forecast Outturn information provided by departments suggests that their net capital expenditure will be £1.5 billion in 2008-09, whilst gross capital expenditure is expected to be £1.6 billion.

The Executive's gross and net capital expenditure plans for 2009-10 and 2010-11 are set out in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1: GROSS AND NET CAPITAL EXPENDITURE PLANS FOR NI DEPARTMENTS.**

£ million	2009-10	2010-11
Net	1,393.1	1,412.9
Gross	1,659.6	2,025.3

Source: Budget 2008-2011

Although it is recognised that the downturn in the property market will also have an impact on the level of capital receipts in 2009-10 and 2010-11, the implications as regards gross capital expenditure plans will only become clear as we move into these financial years.

## Ratepayers

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many ratepayers there are in each of the local government districts. (AQW 5540/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The information requested is provided in the table below.

**RATEPAYERS BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT DISTRICT**

District Council Area	Number of Ratepayers
Antrim	17,369
Ards	28,202
Armagh	20,004
Ballymena	22,343
Ballymoney	10,005
Banbridge	16,750
Belfast	93,590
Carrickfergus	14,048
Castlereagh	23,987
Coleraine	23,305
Cookstown	12,138
Craigavon	30,402
Derry	31,524
Down	24,170
Dungannon & South Tyrone	18,245
Fermanagh	22,495
Larne	12,170
Limavady	10,325
Lisburn	37,710
Magherafelt	13,913
Moyle	6,999
Newry & Mourne	31,268
Newtownabbey	30,003
North Down	30,737
Omagh	17,052
Strabane	12,713

**Civil Service**

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many Civil Service staff are employed in the Foyle constituency at each location, broken down by Department. (AQW 5546/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The information is provided in the table attached.

	Foyle Constituency	
Department	Location	Staff
DARD	Crown Buildings Londonderry	29
	Orchard House	173
	Vets Office Foyle Meats Ltd	15
	Vets Office Wm Grant and Co Ltd	5

	Foyle Constituency	
Department	Location	Staff
<b>Total</b>		<b>222</b>
DE	Waterside House	125
<b>Total</b>		<b>125</b>
DEL	Foyle Jobs and Benefits Office	82
	Lisnagelvin Jobs and Benefits Office	35
	Richmond Chambers	4
<b>Total</b>		<b>121</b>
DETI	Crown Buildings Londonderry	4
<b>Total</b>		<b>4</b>
DFP	Orchard House	50
	Waterside House	118
<b>Total</b>		<b>168</b>
DHSSPS	Waterside House	34
<b>Total</b>		<b>34</b>
DOE	Crown Buildings Lisnagelvin	4
	New Buildings Industrial Estate	27
	Orchard House	51
	Woodburn Environment Agency Depot	5
<b>Total</b>		<b>87</b>
DRD	Depot Crescent Road	61
	Orchard House	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>72</b>
DSD	28 Temple Road	180
	Carlisle House	335
	Crown Buildings Lisnagelvin	57
	Crown Buildings Asylum Road	144
	Orchard House	34
<b>Total</b>		<b>750</b>
OFMDFM	Orchard House	3
<b>Total</b>		<b>3</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>1586</b>

## Notes

Data source as at 25 February 2009.

Figures do not include those on career break.

Figures include permanent, casual, industrial and non-industrial staff.

### Regional Rates

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) domestic and (ii) non-domestic regional rate rises, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 5589/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The table attached shows the percentage increase in the domestic and non domestic regional rates for each of the years between 1998/99 and 2008/09.

Year	Increase in domestic regional rate (%)	Increase in non domestic regional rate (%)
1998/99	6.7	2.5
1999/00	8	5.5
2000/01	8	4.6
2001/02	7	3.3
2002/03	7	3.3
2003/04	6	N/A
2004/05	8.8	3.3
2005/06	9	3.3
2006/07	19	3.3
2007/08	6	3.3
2008/09	0	2.7

### Lone Pensioners Allowance

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what are the figures; and total value for the take up of lone pensioners allowance, for the current financial year. (AQW 5593/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Land & Property Services has made 17,095 awards of Lone Pensioner Allowance with a total value of £2,671,923 in the current financial year. These figures do not include awards of the allowance made by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

### Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) all small and medium sized firms bidding for government contracts as part of a consortium or group of firms; and (ii) all small and medium sized enterprises which have undertaken work as part of a supply chain to larger contractors doing work for the government, in the last 12 months. (AQW 5660/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** This information is not readily available and could only be collected at disproportionate cost.

### Drivers on the Stormont Estate

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps have been taken to ensure that drivers do not speed on the grounds of Stormont Estate. (AQW 5673/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The following measures have been taken to discourage speeding in the grounds of the Stormont Estate:

- Signs are in place at each entrance clearly displaying the 30mph speed limit;
- A number of traffic calming ramps have been installed between the Stoney Road entrance and the entrance to Stormont Castle;
- The Stormont Estate Rangers regularly monitor traffic on the estate roads;

- Mobile speed detection and indication units are installed at different locations within the estate to remind drivers of their speed. The Rangers can and have stopped drivers whom they believe are driving in excess of the speed limit to remind them of the speed restrictions.

### Regional Rates

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much the planned freeze in the non-domestic regional rate will cost. (AQW 5691/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I announced on 15 December 2008 that non domestic regional rates would be frozen in cash terms at current levels for 2009/2010 instead of increasing by 2.7% as originally intended. This change will cost approximately £7.8m.

### Increasing the Usage of E-mail

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of e-mail. (AQW 5694/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** DFP have made significant improvements in this area over recent years. Since the late 1990's e-mail has been the normal communications method within DFP and between Departments. The introduction of the IT shared service centre (IT Assist) has seen the ongoing consolidation of the disparate e-mail services that have operated across Departments into a single resilient e-mail service.

An electronic document and records management system (RecordsNI) was introduced in 2007 and became fully operational in 2008. All eleven Departments now use this system and its common file plan to store and view documents, including e-mails, spreadsheets, and presentations. The use of electronic links to stored documents within the RecordsNI 'TRIM' system has now become the norm across DFP and other Departments and has dramatically decreased the necessity to print documents and e-mails.

No new paper files have been created within DFP since 12th November 2007 and the electronic record became the official record from this date.

DFP is currently working on an updated ICT policy for the NICS which will highlight sustainability. In addition, a review of printing technologies is underway aimed at increasing access to scanned material and a further reduction in the necessity to print correspondence.

DFP actively encourage staff to print only when necessary; however, there will probably always remain a requirement for documents to be printed for specific meetings.

The e-mail policy for the NICS is currently under review and as part of this staff will be actively discouraged from printing unnecessarily.

### European Union Programmes

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the likely effect of the clawback in the current European Union programmes. (AQW 5711/09)

**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. Under the public expenditure rules that apply for the 1994-99 period there would be no impact on the current or future EU funding to Northern Ireland Departments. The amounts published by the European Commission late last year remain under discussion and are expected to be significantly reduced.

### Paying Approved Invoices

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what monitoring he has in place to ensure that Departments are paying approved invoices within 10 days. (AQW 5796/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Account NI provides monthly statistics on payment performance to the six departments which are currently on the programme and this information is being validated by departments. Other departments, not yet on Account NI, compile their own records. Each department and public body is taking appropriate action to ensure that payments are made promptly and that performance in achieving this is monitored.

## DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

### Health and Social Care Trusts

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was paid by each of the Health and Social Care Trusts to private firms in each of the last three years, broken down by (i) year; and (ii) Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 4262/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey):** This question is taken as referring to referrals to the Independent Sector for health care services.

The latest figures available are:

In 2006/07, a total of £22.9m was spent to have patients assessed and treated in the independent sector. It would only be possible to provide a further breakdown of this amount at disproportionate cost due to the reorganisation of the Trusts in April 2007.

**IN 2007/08, A TOTAL OF APPROX £40M WAS SPENT BROKEN DOWN AS FOLLOWS:**

Western Trust	circa £8m;
Southern Trust	circa £3m;
South Eastern Trust	circa £9m;
Northern Trust	circa £2.5m; and
Belfast Trust	circa £17.5m

Final figures for the current year (08/09) are not yet available.

### Ambulance Provision

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the ambulance provision in the Moyle area; and what his plans are to modernise and improve the service. (AQW 5496/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) tactically deploys emergency response cover throughout its Northern Division. As a result, an emergency response to the Moyle area may be provided by vehicles based at a number of stations including Coleraine, Ballycastle, Ballymena and Ballymoney.

In October 2008, I announced a major investment in the ambulance service totalling £100m over the next ten years. This includes £17m over the three year Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period to allow NIAS to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis. I have also allocated additional revenue funding of £12.1m in the current CSR period

This investment will enable NIAS to improve its responsiveness and to provide modern high quality emergency care to people in Northern Ireland.

### Health Service Dentists

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the shortfall in the number of Health Service dentists is; and how it compares with the last two years. (AQW 5508/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The number of dentists registered to provide Health Service dentistry for the last three years is shown in the table below;

	February 07	February 08	February 09
No. of dentists	835	863	915

There are more dentists per head of population in NI than in England, Wales or Scotland, and I do not consider that there is an issue with the overall number of registered dental practitioners. Unfortunately, however, increasing numbers of dentists in NI have chosen to treat patients privately rather than under the Health Service.

My Department is in negotiations with the British Dental Association over a new contract for dentists, which will ensure that they are paid fairly for the work they do, improve oral health and ease difficulties in accessing Health Service dentistry. A tender exercise to recruit additional dentist is nearing completion. I anticipate that 38 additional dentists will be in post by September of this year, providing Health Service dentistry to over 50,000 patients currently unable to access services.

### Health Service Dentists

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which Council areas are in greatest need of Health Service dental services. (AQW 5509/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As I have previously acknowledged, there has been a regrettable decrease in the number of dentists providing Health Service dentistry. This has been particularly prevalent in the WHSSB area and the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council areas have seen a persistent drop in patient registration numbers over recent years.

The Dental Directors of the four Health and Social Services Boards identified areas of need as part of the tender for additional dental services that was instigated by my Department. I anticipate that the additional dentists will be in post starting from September of this year. However, the table below sets out the areas identified by the Dental Directors and the number of additional dentists to be appointed.

Board Area	Location	Number of additional Dentists per Location
Western	Enniskillen	6
	Omagh	2
	Strabane	2
	Londonderry	4
Northern	Carrickfergus	2
	Newtownabbey	4
	Cookstown	2
Eastern	Bangor / Donaghadee	2
	Holywood	2
	Dundonald / Castlereagh	2
	Lisburn / Dunmurry	2
	Carryduff	2
Southern	Banbridge	2
	Dungannon	2
	Newry	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>38</b>

### Epilepsy Clinic

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to establish an epilepsy clinic in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 5541/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** It is for Health and Social Services Boards, as commissioners of services, to prioritise and allocate resources to meet the needs of their local population, including those with epilepsy. Epilepsy clinics currently held within the Belfast Trust include a regional epilepsy clinic held in the Belfast City Hospital every Tuesday and a regional Epilepsy / Obstetric clinic held in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital every other Thursday. There is a seizure clinic in NHSCT once per month and there is an all day epilepsy clinic in the SHSCT on alternate

Wednesdays. The nurse-led epilepsy clinic for the Western Trust area is not presently running, however the Western Board and Trust plan to rectify this situation shortly.

### Craigavon Hospital

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the number of times in financial years (i) 2007/08; and (ii) 2008/09 that Craigavon Hospital had to refuse admission to its Maternity Unit. (AQW 5551/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Craigavon Area Hospital which is part of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that it never refused to admit any women to its Maternity Service.

On one occasion in 2007/08 one lady was transferred to Daisy Hill Hospital.

On one occasion in 2008/09 one lady was transferred to Daisy Hill Hospital.

Both transfers were agreed between the mothers and the clinical team.

### Nursing Positions

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has discussed with the Executive, the Health and Social Care Trusts' proposals to cut 722 nursing positions. (AQW 5576/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Consultation on key proposals is currently ongoing and it would not therefore be appropriate for me to discuss proposals with the Executive at this time.

### Residential Homes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has discussed with the Executive, the Health and Social Care Trusts' proposals to reduce residential homes. (AQW 5577/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Consultation on key proposals is currently ongoing and it would not therefore be appropriate for me to discuss proposals with the Executive at this time.

### Ards Minor Injury Unit

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has discussed with the Executive, the proposal to reduce opening hours of the Ards Minor Injury Unit. (AQW 5578/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Consultation on the Ards Minor Injury Unit has recently closed and responses are being considered by the South Eastern HSC Trust. It would not therefore be appropriate for me to discuss this proposal with the Executive at this time.

### Efficiency Savings

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has discussed with the Executive any alternative plans for efficiency savings for the Health Service. (AQW 5579/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Consultation on key proposals is currently ongoing and it would not therefore be appropriate for me to discuss the possibility or otherwise of alternative plans with the Executive at this time, since this would presuppose the outcome of consultation on existing proposals.

### Ravara House, Bangor

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many letters of protest his Department has received about the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts' proposed closure of Ravara House, Bangor. (AQW 5580/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As of the 24 February 2009 my Department has received 4 letters from elected representatives, and 131 letters from members of the public concerning the South Eastern Trust's proposal on Ravara House. In addition, I have responded to 18 Assembly questions on the subject.

### Child Respite Care

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why places are not available, when funding is in place, for child respite care, and what he is doing to rectify this matter. (AQW 5585/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Respite is of great importance as it supports people to live in the community for as long as it is safe and appropriate to do so. It comes in a variety of forms and may be provided to meet the user's own needs or the needs of carers and families. However, I am aware that demand currently exceeds supply and more needs to be done. I expect Trusts to look critically at how they meet demand for respite provision in their areas, particularly with a view to introducing creative and innovative approaches.

Under the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Learning Disability Programme of Care has been allocated £33m (£17m recurrent) over the three-year period, while Physical and Sensory Disability has been allocated £10m (£7m recurrent).

Part of the investment in each of these Programmes of Care is to provide new or enhanced respite services for both children and adults.

### Childminders

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there is no funding to train childminders, since there are 60 people on the training waiting list. (AQW 5586/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Social Workers in Early Years Teams deliver training to childminders in conjunction with training provided by the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA), which ensures consistency in terms of delivery. It is the increasing number of applications to be assessed, with consequent need for training which has had an impact on the Early Years Teams capacity to meet demand.

The South Eastern Trust has confirmed that there are 60 childminders waiting for training in the Ards Sector. The Trust, in the Ards Sector, directly commissions training for childminders from the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA) and courses are planned for March (24th and 31st) and April (7th and 21st). In light of the demand, additional courses are now planned for May, June and September 2009.

### Prescription Charges

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the annual monetary value will be from the (i) recent reduction in prescription charges and (ii) future abolition of prescription charges. (AQW 5591/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Prior to the reduction in charges the net annual income from prescription charges was £13 million. No figures are available yet with regard to the reduction in income following the reduction in charges to £3 from 1 January 2009.

### Ten-Day Payment Target

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much of the total amount due to suppliers has been paid within the ten-day payment target. (AQW 5643/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:**

Period	Amount Paid within the 10 day target *
Dec-08	2,510,027.80
Jan-09	4,141,406.84
Feb-09	3,125,196.17

\* Payments should issue on or before the 10th working day after the receipt of a valid invoice. For reporting purposes Account NI cannot recognise bank /public holidays or weekends, therefore the statistics above are based on payments made on or within 14 calendar days from the invoice received date. They reflect payments made in a month and not the invoices raised in the month.

### Western Health and Social Care Trust

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 4440/09, if he will obtain information regarding the breakdown by religion of Director level staff, from the Western Health and Social Care Trust, and make it available to all Assembly Members. (AQW 5649/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Having approached the Western HSC Trust directly, we have been informed that as there are only 8 Executive Directors in the Trust, a breakdown by religion cannot be given as this would run the risk of disclosing individual personal information.

The Trust provides information on staff, including religious background, to the Equality Commission for monitoring purposes and summary data is published in the Equality Commission annual monitoring report.

### Genetic Cardiac Abnormalities

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what (i) statutory; and (ii) non statutory programmes are in place to detect and treat potentially genetic cardiac abnormalities affecting young people. (AQW 5670/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Many genetic disorders have major impacts on the cardiovascular system. However, in a recent review of evidence on screening for hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM), the main cause of sudden cardiac death, the UK National Screening Committee advised that screening should not be offered and that screening of athletes for HCM or other causes of sudden cardiac death should not be instituted.

However families with a high risk of inherited cardiac disorders can be identified and affected individuals are offered appropriate monitoring to reduce risk. Services for people with inherited cardiac disorders are provided by consultants at the Belfast City Hospital Regional Genetics Centre and a consultant cardiologist specialising in inherited cardiac diseases at the Royal Victoria Hospital. GPs and consultant cardiologists throughout Northern Ireland can refer patients with a suspected diagnosis or confirmed diagnosis to this regional service.

There are a number of voluntary organisations which promote heart screening and ECG testing programmes these include; Cardiac Risk in the Young (CRY), the Cormac Trust, the British Heart Foundation, the Cardiomyopathy Association and the Ashley Jolly Sad (sudden arrhythmic death) Trust.

### Patient Waiting Lists

**Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) total figures on patient waiting lists; (ii) when waiting list figures have and have not met the 13 weeks target for outpatient, and 21 weeks target for inpatient treatment, in Ulster Hospital in 2008. (AQW 5679/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Department collects waiting time data by Health and Social Care Trust, not by hospital. Information is, however, available for the former Ulster Community and Hospital Trust. The (i) total number of patients waiting for inpatient treatment and a first outpatient appointment, and (ii) the number waiting over the 21 week inpatient and 13 week outpatient targets, at the former Ulster Community and Hospital Trust<sup>1</sup>, for the four quarters of 2008, is shown in the table below.

Quarter Ending	Total Number of Patients Waiting for Inpatient Treatment	Number of Patients Waiting longer than 21 weeks	Total Number of Patients Waiting for a First Outpatient Appointment	Number of Patients Waiting longer than 13 weeks
31-Mar-2008	2,899	0	7,465	0
30-Jun-2008	3,006	0	8,655	0
30-Sep-2008	2,961	0	9,047	1
31-Dec-2008	3,252	0	8,959	1

Source: DHSSPS Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset and Departmental Return CH3.

1 – The former Ulster Community and Hospital Trust included the Ulster, Bangor and Ards hospitals.

### Private Clinics

**Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to account for the circumstances where outpatients are referred to private clinics to meet the target of 13 weeks for an initial appointment, at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 5680/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** At the beginning of the financial year each Trust undertakes a service capacity and demand exercise to ensure that all patients are assessed within 13 weeks. Where it is clear that demand is greater than in-house capacity the Trust engages with the independent sector to provide patient services as required.

### Private Clinics

**Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the private clinics/practices that are used for referrals from the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 5681/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In this financial year (08/09), the South Eastern Trust which operates not only the Ulster hospital but also Lagan Valley and Downe hospitals has procured services from the following independent sector providers:

- McIndoe Surgical Centre, East Grinstead, Sussex
- Fitzwilliam Clinic, Belfast
- 3fivetwo Healthcare Ltd, Belfast
- North West Independent Clinic, Ballykelly

The Trust also has an independent sector contract with a Consultant Cardiologist from Great Britain who carries out local clinics on its behalf.

### Increasing the Usage of E-mail

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of e-mail. (AQW 5693/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** One of the key actions taken by all NICS Departments, including DHSSPS, to reduce the amount of paper documentation was to introduce an Electronic Document and Records Management System (TRIM). TRIM provides a single electronic repository for the storage of documents and records and has reduced the amount of paper documentation created within the Department. From May 2007 the electronic record became the official record for the Department. In tandem, DHSSPS have actively encouraged staff to reduce the amount of paper they create and have provided guidance to staff to enable them to do this. Within the HSC there are currently a number of initiatives aimed at moving away from the paper record and providing more effective access to information needed to deliver safe, efficient, high quality care to patients and clients.

In relation to the usage of e-mail, DHSSPS staff have been instructed that e-mail should be the normal channel for communications within the NICS and the preferred channel for communications externally. Work to enhance the use of electronic messaging systems within the Health and Social Care sector is ongoing.

### Diabetes

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many new cases of diabetes have been diagnosed in the last 12 months. (AQW 5712/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information on the number of new cases of diabetes that have been diagnosed in the last 12 months is not available.

### Generic Medicines

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what rights patients have to remain on current medication and not be changed to generic medicines. (AQW 5736/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department's policy position is that medicines should be prescribed generically instead of by their branded name in all appropriate circumstances. The use of generic medicines in favour of branded equivalents is a central strand in the Department's overall strategy aimed at promoting improved quality in medicines management for all patients through cost effective prescribing.

However, it is for the clinician, in consultation with their patient, to decide on an appropriate course of treatment for the patient and to prescribe the medication to support that treatment.

### Respite Care Provisions

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what respite care provisions are currently in place for parents, in the North Down Area, whose children are seriously ill. (AQW 5737/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Within the North Down area of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust a number of respite services are currently available for parents whose children are seriously ill. This includes domiciliary support via Community Children's Nurses for parents of children who are seriously ill; access to the Hospice at Home service; and parents can also go to the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice and spend time there with their child, supported by staff in the unit.

### Ravara House Day Centre, Bangor

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any staff shortages at Ravara House Day Centre, Bangor. (AQW 5738/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There are currently three staffing vacancies at Ravarra House Day Centre, one day care worker post and two care assistant posts. The two care assistant posts have already been advertised and the day care worker post will be advertised in the near future. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are managing the vacancies by the use of Agency staff.

### **MENCAP: Bangor Office**

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if Mencap's Bangor office is in danger of closure due to lack of funding. (AQW 5739/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust continue to contract with Mencap for care services in the Bangor area and there has been no change to the contract or funding to date. Mencap is a United Kingdom Charity and responsibility for operational matters rests with the charity.

### **Respite Beds**

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust intends to buy a respite bed at the new Blair Lodge complex in Bangor. (AQW 5740/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have been advised by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust that whilst they are working closely with Blair Lodge to commission new and extended residential services they do not intend to commission a respite bed within current provision which is targeted at long stay care. The Trust will however be considering whether a transitions bed is required to facilitate phased admissions for those who have been assessed as requiring a longer term placement in the near future.

### **Loughview Surgery**

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4301/09, the timescale for a decision on Global Sum and Correction Factor payments for Loughview Surgery. (AQW 5750/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department has written to Loughview Surgery to inform them of the outcome of the decision in relation to the practice's request for payment assistance.

### **Road Rescue Team**

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5439/09, if places in the new Road Rescue Team were offered to serving officers with the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service who then declined the offers. (AQW 5756/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I can confirm that places were offered to current Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service personnel who then declined to take up appointment.

### **Family Support Workers**

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (i) detail the proposal to cut eight family support workers to one, on a 16 hour weekly contract, in the Armagh & Dungannon Health & Social Services Trust area; and (ii) for his assessment of whether services will be adversely affected. (AQW 5815/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There is no proposal in the Southern Health & Social Care Trust (previously Armagh & Dungannon Health & Social Care Trust) to "cut eight family support workers to one, on a 16 hour weekly contract, in the Armagh & Dungannon Health & Social Services Trust area". The Southern Trust has family support workers in each of its three localities which are based on Legacy Trust areas. These are managed and supervised under differing arrangements. The Trust is currently reviewing its family support services including the management and deployment of these staff.

As part of this work Trust management have began meetings with family support staff.

The proposals should give efficiencies in management costs. There will be no reduction in the amount of family support provided in the Trust. The aim will be to provide an equitable consistent service across the Trust.

### Family Support Workers

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many families in the Armagh & Dungannon Health & Social Services Trust area are receiving assistance from a family support worker. (AQW 5816/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As at 3 March 2009, 29 families (73 children), within the Armagh and Dungannon area, were receiving assistance from a family support worker.

### Age for Buying Alcohol

**Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he would consider raising the age for buying alcohol from 18 to 21 years old. (AQW 5903/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Addressing alcohol misuse, particularly binge and young people's drinking, is a key priority for my Department. To this end, my Department has led in the development of a Young People's Drinking Action Plan that seeks to co-ordinate action to tackle this issue. This plan is currently with my Executive colleagues for consideration.

The Young People's Drinking Action Plan does not currently propose to raise the age of sale of alcohol to 21, and responsibility for licensing legislation does not rest with my Department. However, this is an issue that may need to be considered further within Northern Ireland.

### Review of Public Administration

**Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5092/09, how many people taking up voluntary redundancy were aged 58 and over. (AQW 5904/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** 133 HSC staff who have taken RPA related voluntary redundancy were aged 58 and over.

### Alcohol in Supermarkets

**Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if consideration is being given to banning the sale of alcohol in supermarkets. (AQW 5948/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am concerned about the availability of alcohol and the impact that alcohol misuse is having on Northern Ireland. However liquor licensing legislation, which regulates the sale of alcohol, is the responsibility of the Department of Social Development.

### Tyrone County Hospital

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are provided at the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh. (AQW 5971/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Centre provides a full range of minor injury services including treatment for cuts, bruises, sprains or minor fractures to limbs and treatment to walk-in patients. Care is delivered by experienced Emergency Nurse Practitioners with support from a team of general emergency department nurses and daily support from senior medical staff.

### **Tyrone County Hospital**

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many; and (ii) what the total cost was of, glossy documents on Tyrone County Hospital's transition of Acute Medical Services produced by the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5972/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am advised that the Western Health and Social Care Trust has, to date, produced 60,000 copies of leaflets to inform the communities in Fermanagh and Tyrone on the transition of acute medical services at the Tyrone County Hospital.

The total cost of printing and distribution was £8420.

### **Altnagelvin Hospital**

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients admitted to Altnagelvin Hospital since 1 January 2009, have had to spend time on a trolley until a bed became available. (AQW 5974/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information is not available in the form requested.

### **Erne Hospital**

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients admitted to Erne Hospital since 1 January 2009, have had to spend time on a trolley until a bed became available. (AQW 5976/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information is not available in the form requested.

### **Tyrone County Hospital**

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm if the 40 rehabilitation beds and the 22 palliative care beds are in place in Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh, and how many staff, broken down by grade, there are to deliver the service. (AQW 6016/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Western Health and Social Care Trust advises that it plans to provide 30 rehabilitation beds and 10 palliative care beds at the Tyrone County Hospital. A further 22 beds will be provided to support day procedures. This information was provided in the information leaflet 'Tyrone County Hospital: Transition of Acute Medical Services' recently distributed to households across Fermanagh and Tyrone.

I am advised that the rehabilitation ward is currently staffed for 17 beds with 23 whole time nursing staff broken down as follows - 1 band 7, 1 band 6, 13 band 5, 3 band 3 and 5 band 2 nurses. The Trust will be moving as soon as possible to the full complement of 30 beds with almost 40 whole time nursing staff.

I am also advised that the 10 palliative care beds are currently staffed by a complement of 22 nursing staff, comprising 1 band 7, 1 band 6, 14 band 5, and 6 band 2 staff.

The Trust is in the final stages of agreeing the numbers of Allied Health Professionals required to support these developments.

### **Tyrone County Hospital**

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why inpatient services for acutely ill patients was not sustained at the Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh. (AQW 6017/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I refer you to the answer I gave in AQW 4362/09 on 2 February.

### Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the second Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service appliance is still in Portstewart or was it removed, prior to his decision on its future. (AQW 6094/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The second appliance is still located in Portstewart.

### George Best Belfast City Airport

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) any public health issues and (ii) any potential health issues related to the proposed runway extension at George Best Belfast City Airport. (AQW 6123/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I believe it is imperative that any decisions on the proposed runway extension at George Best Belfast City Airport are taken in the context of a proper understanding of the wider impacts that such a development may have on the local communities most affected. I share the concerns that have been raised by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board with Planning Service in relation to potential health impacts and public safety issues. These concerns relate to health impacts that may arise from increased levels of noise and air pollution, and public safety concerns associated with the proximity of significant residential development and major industrial sites and the possibility of bird strikes. In particular, I support the Board's call for a Health Impact Assessment to be carried out in relation to these proposals.

## DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much water was lost through system leakage in the Craigavon Borough and Banbridge District Council areas in each of the past three years; and what steps have been taken to improve this situation. (AQW 5222/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy):** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it assesses the levels of water lost through the water distribution network by geographical water supply areas which differ from council areas. However, the water supply areas that relate most closely to the council areas for which the information is requested are Craigavon and Newry. The leakage levels for these areas, in each of the past 3 years, are set out in the table below.

Water Supply Area	Leakage (million litres)		
	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Craigavon	7063	6121	5636
Newry	6176	4873	4880

NIW continues to be engaged in a major programme of leakage control to reduce overall losses through leakage detection and repair. During the past three years almost £14 million has been invested in the Craigavon and Banbridge council areas on watermain rehabilitation. One of the objectives of the watermain rehabilitation programme is to reduce leakage.

### M2 Improvement Scheme

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to remove any paramilitary or sectarian items or displays on his Department's property along the boundary of the M2 prior to the completion of the expansion scheme. (AQW 5547/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has signed up to a multi agency protocol about the display of flags in public areas, which was launched in April 2005. The aim of the protocol is to provide a pro-active approach, with the support of communities and their representatives, to address the removal of flags from arterial routes, town centres and from particular locations, such as interface areas, or near schools, hospitals and churches.

The protocol recognises that an effective resolution to the flags issue is more likely to be achieved through the co-operation of local communities. It will require widespread community support to enable the partnership established by the protocol to be effective. The agency that is in the most effective position to consult, negotiate or resolve the situation will take the lead.

Roads Service has referred this issue to the PSNI, who are considered best placed to lead, on this occasion.

Under the protocol, Roads Service will facilitate the removal of flags as necessary by providing access equipment and resources to remove unwanted flags, but only on the provision that prior agreement for their removal has been established.

### M2 Improvement Scheme

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many trees will be planted when the landscaping of the M2 is complete; and how many trees were removed during the construction process. (AQW 5548/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that some 44,000 trees and shrubs will be planted as part of the M2 improvement scheme. Roads Service does not hold records of the number of trees removed during the course of this scheme. However, every effort was made to keep the number of trees removed to a minimum.

### MV Canna Ferry

**Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many days in each month since July 2008 the (a) MV Canna ferry and (b) the relevant passenger-only ferry have been out of service on the Ballycastle-Rathlin line; and to detail the reasons. (AQW 5553/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The MV Canna was not out of service for any full day of sailings during the months of July and August 2008. It was out of service from 29 September to 3 October 2008 during its annual overhaul. An alternative roll-on/ roll-off vessel was used during this period to provide the service. The MV Canna was out of service for two days during October, two days during November 2008 and one day during January 2009 due to adverse weather conditions.

The relevant passenger-only ferry service did not miss any full day of sailings during July and August 2008. On days during these months when the vessel was unavailable due to mechanical problems, sailings were provided by a relief vessel. The passenger-only ferry was out of service on one day during September for planned maintenance and two days in November due to mechanical problems. A relief vessel was not provided on these days but the MV Canna was available for passengers.

The passenger only ferry was out of service for two days during October, one day during November, one day during December 2008 and five days during January 2009 due to adverse weather conditions.

### Traffic Calming Schemes

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many traffic calming schemes are in place in North Down. (AQW 5568/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are 33 traffic calming schemes, and four school travel and safety projects, in North Down.

## Free Public Transport

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Regional Development the annual monetary value of free public transportation for people over 60. (AQW 5592/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have interpreted the term ‘value’ to equate to the cost of the scheme – that is reimbursement to transport operators.

Before 1 October 2008, free public transport was available to people aged 65 and over. On 1 October 2008, the scheme was extended to cover people aged 60-64.

The annual cost of providing free public transport to these age groups over the last 3 financial years, is detailed in the table below.

Financial Year	Cost of Travel
2006/2007	£11.9 m – for age 65+
2007/2008	£13.5 m – for age 65+
2008/2009*	£18.2 m – for age 65+ ; and for age 60-64 from 1 October 2008

The costs above do not include administration.

\* The cost for 2008/2009 is projected, as actual costs are only available up to the end of January 2009.

## Salt Boxes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many, and the location of salt boxes provided in the North Down area. (AQW 5611/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department’s Road Service has provided 145 salt boxes within the North Down area, and they are located as follows:

Location	
Cultra Slip Road, Belfast bound to Folk Museum;	Clandeboyne Way, opposite S/L No.6;
Abbots Wood, near junction Demesne Road;	Rostrevor Drive, opposite name plate;
Strathearn Court at Street Light (S/L) No. 1;	Moyne Road, Conlig, junction Vermont Avenue at S/L No.5;
Cedar Grove, opposite S/L No.4;	Bangor Road, Conlig, at top of Green Road;
The Green at S/L No.1;	Meadowvale, opposite No.15;
Inver Park, opposite S/L No.4;	Meadowvale Park at S/L No.2;
Demense Park at No.15, at wall;	Beechfield junction Main Street, Conlig;
Demense Avenue at No.15;	Tower Road/Main Street, Conlig;
Elizabeth Road, opposite S/L No.3;	Forrest Hill/Main Street, Conlig;
Ardmore Road at S/L No.6;	Forrest Hill, Conlig, at S/L 10 at side of No. 74;
Ardmore Heights, opposite No.9 at S/L No.6;	Westmorland Crescent, side of No.2 (on grass);
Ardmore Road, past No.39, near radius;	Westmorland Crescent at S/L No.6;
Glenview Road No.7;	Harehills Drive, junction Westmorland Crescent;
Glenview Avenue opposite S/L No.3;	Silverstream Crescent at No.61 (in laneway);
Ardmore Park at No.3;	Silverstream Drive at No.18 (at wall);
Brook Street at Clinic;	Silverstream Avenue at No 31;
Windsor Avenue at No.12;	Manor Park/Manor Avenue;
Victoria Road at end of grass verge;	Hillcrest Walk, outside No 9;

Location	
Tudor Oaks, No 3, at wall;	Bangor Police Station/Castle Park Avenue;
Old Quay Court, No.4;	King Street at sign no. 4;
Kintyre Avenue at S/L No.5;	Tennyson Avenue at S/L No.1;
Princess Gardens at S/L No.15;	Princetown Road at Junction of Seacourt Lane;
Princess Park, opposite No.9;	Railwayview Street, No.54;
Torgrange at No.10, near S/L;	Windsor Gardens at No.2-4;
Invergourie Road at Stathleven Park name plate;	Rugby Avenue, opposite No.60;
Brown's Brae, opposite No.5;	Donard Avenue, No.44 (upper side of BT pole);
The Spires at S/L No 3;	Donard Avenue, No.25;
Woodcroft Park, outside No 3;	Maryville Park, opposite No.22;
Creighton's Green Road, before speed limit sign 1/3 on bend;	Bryansglen West, No.7 (lower side of S/L);
Creighton's Green Road, down from No.15 on bend;	Bryansglen Avenue, No.21;
Creighton's Green Road, down from No.41 on RHS at field gate;	Grange Avenue, No.5;
Carlston Avenue, No.1/Whinney Hill;	Downshire Road, upper side of Maxwell Road at S/L No.14;
Martello Park, No.10;	Downshire Road, lower side of Maxwell Road at S/L 15;
Martello Park, No 28;	Clelland Park South at No.12;
Larch Hill ,No.1 (half way up hill);	Alexandra Gardens, SL 6;
Larch Hill Drive, No.3;	Church Avenue, junction Church Drive at wall;
Ballygrainey Road, No.3 (at wall near A2);	Abbey Park, No.49/51;
Ballygrainey Road, opposite No.15;	Fairfield Road, at junction Dellmont Road side of no. 50;
Station Road, Craigavad, junction A2 opposite S/L 157;	Fairfield Road, opposite No.103 on verge;
Dalchoolin at No 19;	Dellmont Drive at S/L 3 outside No 10;
Cultra Avenue, opposite No.41;	Sunningdale Park No.7;
Tarawood at S/L No.1;	Glenanne Park, opposite Sunningdale Court between hedges;
Carney Hill, near junction A2;	Stanley Road, opposite No.9;
Quarry Court, past S/L No.2;	Seaforth Road, opposite S/L No.3;
Grey Point at S/L No.3;	Grove Park, junction Bellevue;
Ballymoney Road, near Whinney Hill;	Baylands Fourth Avenue at No.4;
Ballymullen Road, opposite No.40;	Beverly Hills, junction Beverly Drive at white wall;
Ballymullen Road at No.6;	Beverly Gardens, junction Beverly Drive opposite No.34;
Meadow Way, junction near Ballymullan Road;	Conniston Drive, beside S/L No.2;
Burnside Park, at No.2 (at wall/Meadow Way);	Chippendale Vale, junction Chippendale Park;
Meadow Park North, No 11 at mini pillar;	Windmill Lane at S/L No.1;
Carolsteen Park at No.1A junction Bridge Road;	Portview/Ballymacconnell Road;
Killaire Avenue, opposite S/L No.8 (at fence);	Balloo Crescent, opposite Howells;
Ailsa Park at S/L No.3;	Cranley Road, opposite No.4;
Ravelstone Avenue, junction Killaire Park (at wall);	Cranley Grove, S/L No. 4;
Killaire Avenue at No 5;	Cranley Hill, No.2;
Station Road, opposite S/L No.15 (on grass) below No.68 on waste ground;	Irvine Park, outside No 38;

Location	
Station View at S/L No.1;	Hanover Chase at wide footpath, beside No 7 Hanover Court;
Wandsworth Park, junction Wandsworth Road;	Beaumont Drive, outside No 26;
Lyndhurst Avenue, opposite No.2;	Malvern Heights at S/L No. 28, at bottom of Hill;
Kilieen Avenue at S/L No.9;	The Brae junction Ard-Na-Ree;
Innisfayle Drive opposite S/L No.4;	Springwell Drive, beside S/L No.3;
Jubilee Drive, near S/L No.15;	Springwell Drive, junction The Brae, opposite No.7;
Springhill Heights, No.10;	Springwell Crescent, No.58 at BT pole;
Farm Grove, junction Springhill Avenue;	Springwell Crescent, opposite S/L 4 at rose bed;
Ballyquinton Gardens, side of No.18 at BT pole;	The Brae, at wall opposite Hillfoot;
Kilclief Gardens at S/L No.103;	Glenganagh Park at S/L 3;
Craigboy Mews at telegraph pole;	Towerview at S/L No.4;
Balligan Gardens at S/L No.122;	Ivyhill Crescent at S/L No. 2;
Birch Park, junction Birch Drive;	Ballymacormick Park at name plate;
Clandeboy Way at S/L No.1;	Towerview Avenue, opposite No.101; and
Monea Way at S/L No.8 (end of wall);	Sherwood Road at S/L No.6;
Rostrevor Way at No.12;	

### Salt Boxes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria for the location of salt boxes.

(AQW 5612/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that it will consider the provision of a salt bin on roads adopted/maintained by them, which do not qualify for inclusion onto the gritting schedule, when the following criteria are met:-

- the location in question must be on the publicly maintained road network;
- the gradient of the road in question must be over 5%;
- no reasonable alternative route shall be available; and
- the subject road attains a minimum overall score, derived using a specific formula, where points are awarded depending on road geometry, residential usage, community welfare and commercial usage.

In addition, new salt bins will not be provided unless requested by a member of the public, who also agrees to spread the salt provided.

Where salt bins are provided they shall:-

- be available for use from November to March inclusive. However, if necessary they may be removed during the summer months to prevent vandalism or theft;
- be inspected regularly and refilled as necessary during the winter months; and
- normally not be provided within 100m of another bin.

Roads Service already commits significant resources to maintaining approximately 3,500 salt bins it has provided on public roads.

### Rathlin Island Ferry

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Regional Development why a public service obligation was not in place before the new Rathlin Island ferry contract was signed.

(AQW 5622/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** A public service obligation, as defined in Article 2 (4) and Article 4 (2) of Regulation (EEC) No. 3577/92, is not required for the Rathlin Island ferry service contract. Moreover, the contract that has been put in place for this public service was considered to be more appropriate in that it places a wide range of obligations on the operator, including conditions concerning the quality of service which could not form part of a public service obligation. In any event, the Commission guidance COM (2006) 196 makes clear that the service would be exempt from a requirement for notification because of the scale of operations.

### Rathlin Island Ferry

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department has issued a written apology to the former Rathlin Island ferry staff member whose identity was revealed following his 'whistle blowing' allegations. (AQW 5623/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In correspondence following the publication of the Investigation into the Procurement of the Rathlin Ferry Service contract my officials acknowledged in writing the difficulty that the process had caused for those who considered themselves to be "whistleblowers". The investigation report dealt fully with the concerns expressed by the former staff member.

### Rathlin Island Ferry

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department's subsidy payments for the Rathlin Island ferry service complied with European Union state aid regulations. (AQW 5624/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The contract utilised and the payments made to enable operation of the Ballycastle to Rathlin Island ferry service are compliant with EU state aid law.

### Rathlin Island Ferry

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Regional Development if a public service obligation is currently in place for the Rathlin Island ferry route. (AQW 5625/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** A public service obligation, as defined in Article 2 (4) and Article 4 (2) of Regulation (EEC) No. 3577/92, is not required and is not in place in relation to the Ballycastle to Rathlin Island ferry service.

### Tourist Signage

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development in what circumstances tourist signage will be provided to tourist attractions or amenities in the countryside from locations other than the nearest A or B class junction. (AQW 5668/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that the main purpose of tourist signs is to guide visitors to their desired destinations, via the most appropriate route, at the latter stages of their journey, particularly where destinations are hard to find. As with all other direction signs, tourist signs are an aid to safe and efficient navigation, to complement, but not replace, pre-planning of the journey and the use of verbal instructions, maps and road atlases.

One of the fundamental principles behind Road Service's tourist signing policy is that tourist signing should supplement, rather than duplicate, information on other direction signs already provided for the guidance of all traffic. Consequently tourist signing is generally only provided from the nearest 'A' or 'B' route, unless there are very good traffic management or road safety reasons for signing from further away.

### Tourist Signage

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development if any review is planned in relation to the policy on road signage for tourist attractions. (AQW 5669/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service facilitates the provision of tourist traffic signs using its policy "Tourist Signing in Northern Ireland". The policy was published in April 2004 and was jointly developed and agreed with the Tourist Board.

Under the policy, Roads Service agrees and implements local tourist signing plans. These plans are drawn up by local Councils in conjunction with the Tourist Board.

The policy provides a consistent framework for the provision of tourist signing, and I can advise the Member that there are no plans to review it, at present.

### Trains on the Larne Line

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development how old is the Larne line train that left Carrickfergus at 8:05am on Thursday 5 February 2009. (AQW 5682/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The train is 31 years old.

### Average Age of Trains

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development the average age of all trains on each railway route. (AQW 5683/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Translink have informed me that the average age of trains on the Larne line is 24 years. The average age of trains on the Bangor, Portadown/Newry and Londonderry lines is 3.5 years.

### Trains on the Larne Line

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development what safety checks are carried out on trains on the Larne Line, and how often they are carried out. (AQW 5684/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The following safety checks are carried out on Class 450 and Class 80 trains which operate mainly on the Larne Line:

- Operational checks: at every station/halt, before departure the conductor is required to check that all platform workings are complete and doors are closed;
- Pre-service daily checks: at the start of service each day, train crew check and sign off the brake system, the train emergency system, doors, and the door central locking system;
- Fuel checks: when the train is fuelled there is a visual inspection of the train. Any issues logged during the day are attended to;
- Every night a train environmental check is carried out, including toilet function, condition of doors, vestibules, floors, and seats;
- Every 20 operating days or three weeks, a comprehensive engineering inspection is carried out, incorporating detailed condition analysis of the above systems.

### Water Pressure

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many complaints have been received about poor water pressure, broken down by constituency or council area. (AQW 5685/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that complaints are not recorded by parliamentary constituency or council area and it is not possible to provide the breakdown sought. However, since its establishment on 1 April 2007, NIW has received a total of 12,672 complaints from customers regarding poor water pressure.

## Train Passengers

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development why passengers were asked to get off the train at Yorkgate on Thursday 5 February 2009. (AQW 5686/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** An incident occurred on one of the recently refurbished Class 80 slam door trains on the 07:55 Whitehead to Belfast service. The incident involved a carriage door that had not been properly closed prior to departure and as a result it came into contact with a bridge and was badly damaged. Although the train was fitted with a central door locking mechanism, this requires the door to be properly closed if it is to be effective. There were no injuries and passengers were moved into another carriage by the conductor, de-trained at York Road and directed onto another train. Translink has advised me that all train conductors have been briefed again fully on the correct station dispatch procedures which will ensure doors are securely closed.

## Increasing the Usage of E-mail

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of e-mail. (AQW 5692/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department promotes the use of electronic working through the use of e-mails for internal correspondence as standard and for external correspondence where appropriate. The Department's internet site and intranet are used for electronic publication and the TRIM electronic document and record management system is the mainstay for the management and storage of records. In addition my Department has an on-going project running in its Clarence Court headquarters the aim of which is to reduce the quantity of paper copy held. This exercise complies with guidance set by the Public Record Office for Northern Ireland (PRONI).

My Department is on occasions required to produce and maintain paper copy, for example for legal reasons or to cater for those without access to IT facilities.

## Gritting Roads

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all the roads on the gritting schedule in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 5721/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Details of my Department's Roads Service gritting schedule for roads in the Lagan Valley constituency area are set out in the table below.

### ROADS SERVICE GRITTING SCHEDULE – LAGAN VALLEY CONSTITUENCY

Lisburn Area		
Road Name	From	To
Aghnarisk Road	Culcavy Road	Kesh Road
Antrim Road	Bentrim Road roundabout	Ballymacash Road
Antrim Road roundabout	Bentrim Road	Bentrim Road
Antrim Street	Bow Street	Bentrim Road roundabout
Avonmore Park	Drumbeg Drive	Warren Gardens
Bachelor's Walk	Antrim Street	Railway Street
Ballinderry Road	Longstone Street	Moir Road
Ballinderry Road	Soldierstown Road	Lower Ballinderry Road
Ballycoan Road	Hillhall Road	Mealough Road
Ballylesson Road	Milltown Road	Purdyburn Hill
Ballylesson Road	Purdyburn Hill	Drumbeg Road
Ballymacash Road	Pond Park Road	Prince William Road

<b>Lisburn Area</b>		
<b>Road Name</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Ballymacash Road	Prince William Road	Rathvarna Drive
Ballymacash Road	Rathvarna Drive	Nettlehill Road
Ballynahinch Road	Main St, Saintfield	Carryduff Road
Ballynahinch Road	Saintfield Road	Mini roundabout, Ballynahinch
Ballynahinch Road	Kensington Park	Comber Road
Ballynahinch Road	Young Street	Kensington Park
Ballynahinch Road	Hillsborough Road, Dromara	Dromore Rd, Ballynahinch
Ballyskeagh Road	Drumbeg Road	Belfast Road
Barrack Street	Church Lane	Smithfield Street
Belfast Road	Seymour Street	Black's Road
Belfast Road	Black's Road	Finaghy Road North
Belfast Road	A26 Moira Road	Bridge Road
Belfast Road, Hillsborough	Dromore Road	Dromara Road
Belsize Road	Belfast Road	Milltown Road
Benson Street	Causeway End Road	Bentrim Road
Bentrim Road	Benson Street	Bentrim Road roundabout
Bentrim Road	Bentrim Road roundabout	Antrim Road roundabout
<b>Lisburn Area</b>		
Bentrim Road roundabout	Prince William Road	Prince William Road
Blaris Road	Hillsborough Road	Halftown Road
Bow Street	Market Place	Antrim Street
Bridge Street	Queens Road	Market Square
Bridge Street, Banbridge	Church Square, Banbridge	Newry Street
Brokerstown Road	Glenavy Road	Knockmore Road
Carnreagh	Lisburn Road	Carnreagh Road
Carnreagh Road	Carnreagh	Ballynahinch Road
Castle Street	Railway Street	Seymour Street
Causeway End Road	Ballinderry Road	Causeway End Park
Chapel Hill	Theipval Road	Bow Street
Church Lane	Hillsborough Road	Barrack Street
Church Street	Banbridge Road	Market Square
Clonevin Park	Magherlave Road	Antrim Road
Comber Road	Ballynahinch Road	Carryduff Road
Comber Road	Upper Ballynahinch Road	Ballynahinch Road
Creighton Road	Old Golf Course Road	Stewartstown Road roundabout
Cross Lane	Ballinderry Road	Moira Road
Crumlin Road	Lower Ballinderry Road	Chapel Road
Culcavy Road	Lisburn Road	Harry's Road

<b>Lisburn Area</b>		
<b>Road Name</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Culcavy Road	Aghnarisk Road	Blaris Road
Derriaghy Road	Belsize Road	McKinstrey Road
Derriaghy Road	Magheralave Road	Pond Park Road
Dromara Road	Dromare Road	Ballynahinch Road
Dromore Road	High Street, Ballynahinch	Mossvale Road, Dromore
Drumbeg Drive	Killany Avenue	Warren Gardens
Drumbeg Road	Ballylesson Road	Upper Malone Road
Drumbo Road	Front Road	Hillhall Road
Duncans Road	Antrim Road	Kirkwoods Road
Dundrod Drive	Ballinderry Road	Killany Avenue
Edenturcher Road	Crumlin Road	Glen Road
Fort Road	Ballylesson Road	Purdyburn Hill
Front Road	Mealough Road	Drumbo Road
Front Road	Mealough Road	Comber Road
Glebe Road	Ballynahinch Rd, Annahilt	Ballykeel Road
Glen Road, Maghaberry	Moirs Road	Maghaberry Road
Glenavy Road	Brokerstown Road	Moirs Road
Governor's Road	Hillsborough Road	Longstone Street
Governor's Road roundabout	Longstone Street	Longstone Street
Gravelhill Road	Moirs Road	Dunygarton Road
Halftown Road	Blaris Road	Moirs Road
Harmony Hill	Belsize Road	Moss Road
Harry's Road	Culcavy Road	Hillsborough Road
Hill Street	Laganbank Road	Linenhall Street
Hill Street (southbound)	Laganbank Road	End
Hillhall Road	Drumbeg Road	Mercer Street
<b>Lisburn Area</b>		
Hillsborough Road	Sprucefield Depot	Market Place
Hillsborough Road	Thornbrook Road	Innisloughlin Road
Hillsborough roundabout	Hillsborough Road	Hillsborough Road
Hospital Road	Purdysburn Hill	Hospital entrance
Hospital Road	Hospital entrance	Milltown Road roundabout
Jersey Avenue	Belsize Road	Lester Avenue
Kensington Park	Ballynahinch Road	Saintfield Road
Kesh Road	Dunygarton Road	Aghnatriisk Road
Killany Avenue	Dundrod Drive	Drumbeg Drive
Kirkwoods Road	Duncans Road	Belsize Road
Knockmore Road	Brokerstown Road	Moirs Road

<b>Lisburn Area</b>		
<b>Road Name</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Knockmore Road	Brokerstown Road	Prince William Road
Laganbank junction	Laganbank Road	Queens Road
Laganbank Road	Hillsborough Road	Hill Street
Laganbank Road	Union Bridge	Hill Street
Lany Road	Innisloughlin Road	St James' Road
Laurelhill Road	Prince William Road	Ballymacash Road
Lester Avenue	Jersey Avenue	Magherlave Park East
Linenhall Street	Market Street	Bridge Street
Lisburn Road	Hillsborough Road	Ballynahinch Road
Lisburn Road, Ballynahinch	Riverside Road	Main Street, Hillsborough
Lisnabilla Road	Moir Road	Moir Road
Lissie Road	Moir Road	Ballinderry Road
Longstone Street	Governor's Road	Warren Gardens
Longstone Street	Governor's Road roundabout	Ballinderry Road
Low Road	Queen's Road	Belfast Road
Lower Ballinderry Road	Moir Road	Crumlin Road
Maghaberry Road	Glen Road	Moir Road
Magheraconluce Road	Ballynahinch Road	Ballynahinch Road
Magherlave Park East	Lester Avenue	Magherlave Road
Magherlave Road	Bachelor's Walk	Clonevin Park
Magherlave Road	Magherlave Park East	Thiepval Barracks
Magherlave Road	Magherlave Park East	Clonevin Park
Main St, Hillsborough	Ballynahinch Road	Hillsborough Road
Market Place	Smithfield Street	Bow Street
Market Square	All sides of Linen Centre	Market Street
Market Street	Market Square	Smithfield Street
McKinstrey Road	Belfast Road	The Cutts
McKinstrey Road	Derriaghy Road	Stewartstown Road roundabout
Meadow Road	Moir Road	Thornbrook Road
Mealough Road	Saintfield Road	Front Road
Milltown Road	Belsize Road	Magheralave Road
Moir Road	Knockmore Road	Lissie Road
Moir Road	Ballinderry Road	Knockmore Road
Moir Road	Halftown Road	M1 roundabout, Moir
Moir Road	St James' Road	Hillsborough Road
<b>Lisburn Area</b>		
Moir Road	Nutts Corner Roundabout	M1 roundabout, Moir
Moss Road	Skyline Drive	Belsize Road

<b>Lisburn Area</b>		
<b>Road Name</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Moss Road	Belfast Road	Skyline Drive
Mullaglass Road	Barnfield Road	Sheepwalk Road
Nettlehill Road	Ballymacash Road	Prince William Road
Nettlehill Road	Pond Park Road	Prince William Road
Pond Park Road	Derriaghy Road	Ballymacash Road
Pond Park Road	Nettlehill Road	Mullaghglass Road
Prince William Road	Nettlehill Road	Bentrim Road roundabout
Purdyburn Hill	Ballylesson Road	Hospital Road
Queens Road	Union Bridge	Seymour Street
Railway Street	Bachelor's Walk	Castle Street
Rathvarna Drive	Ballymacash Road	Ballymacash Road
Ravarnet Road	Young Street	Ravarnet Road
Ravarnet Road	Ravarnet Road	Hillsborough Road
Ravarnet Road	A1 Hillsborough Road	Comber Road
River Road	Belfast Road	Ballyskeagh Road
Saintfield Road	M1 Junction 6	Hillsborough Rd, B'hinch
Saintfield Road	Carryduff Road	Saintfield Road
Saintfield Road	Kensington Park	Sloan Street
Seymour Street	Castle Street	Wallace Avenue
Seymour Street	Wallace Avenue	Belfast Road
Sheepwalk Road	Mullaglass Road	Glenavy Road
Skyline Drive	Belsize Road	Moss Road
Sloan Street	Mercer Street	Young Street
Smithfield Street	Market Street	Market Place
Soldierstown Road	Moirs Road	Ballinderry Road, Aghalee
The Cutts	McKinstrey Road	Belfast Road
Theipval Road	Bentrim Road roundabout	Chapel Hill
Trench Road	Aghnatrisk Road	Moirs Road
Union Bridge	Queens Road	Young Street
Upper Ballynahinch Road	Ballykeel Road	Comber Road
Wallace Avenue	Seymour Street	Railway Street
Warren Gardens	Longstone Street	Warren Park
Warren Gardens	Drumbeg Drive	Warren Park
Warren Park	Warren Gardens	Hillsborough Road
Whitemountain Road	Sheepwalk Road	Pond Park Road
Wilmar Road eastbound	Belsize Road	McKinstrey Road
Wilmar Road roundabout	McKinstrey Road	McKinstrey Road
Wilmar Road westbound	McKinstrey Road	Belsize Road

<b>Lisburn Area</b>		
<b>Road Name</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Young Street	Union Bridge	Ballynahinch Road
<b>Total length in Lisburn Section</b>		<b>303 km</b>
<b>Banbridge Area</b>		
B7 Rathfriland Road	Constituency boundary	Dromara
Kinallen Road	Howe Road	Banbridge Road
Tullyniskey Road	Gall Bog Road	Enagh Road
<b>Banbridge Area</b>		
Knockgorm Road	Gall Bog Road	Waringsford Road
Waringsford Road (C328)	All	
Dromore Road (B2),	All	
Ballynahinch Road (B2) (into Dromore)	Constituency boundary	Dromore
Mossvale Road	All	
Princess Street	All	
Market Square	All	
Bridge Street	All	
Meeting Street	All	
Banbridge Road	All	
Lower Quilly Road	All	
Church Street	All	
Maypole Hill	All	
Gallows Street	All	
Milebush Road	All	
Slip Road	All	
Hillsborough Road	All	
Mount Street	Market Square	Princess Street
Market Square	All	
Maypole Hill	All	
Barban Hill	All	
Rampart Street	All	
Meeting Street	All	
Pound Hill	Meeting Street	Wallace Park
Wallace Park	All	
Pound Hill	All	
Diamond Road	Dromore	Gall Bog Road
A1 Dual Carriageway	Constituency boundary	Backnamullagh Road
<b>Total length in Banbridge Section</b>		<b>68 km</b>
<b>Craigavon Area</b>		

Lisburn Area		
Road Name	From	To
Aghalee Road (part)	Constituency boundary	Aghalee
Lisburn Road, Moira (part)	Moira	M1 Roundabout
Meeting Street/Clarehill Road Moira	Main Street, Moira	Bottier Road
Lurgan Road, Moira	Constituency boundary	Moira
Backwood Road, Moira (part)	Main St, Moira	Langtry Lodge
Lurgan Road, Dromore	Constituency boundary	Dromore
Total length in Craigavon Section		11.3 km

### Gritting Roads

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount spent on gritting roads in the Lagan Valley constituency in the last 12 months. (AQW 5722/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that it does not maintain a record of specific salting costs by Electoral Area. However, I can advise that the annual cost of providing the complete service in the North is approximately £5 million.

### Water Pressure

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development what actions have been taken to improve water pressure. (AQW 5723/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it has invested approximately £110 million over the past five years on new or rehabilitated watermains as part of its Watermains Rehabilitation Programme. This programme of work has provided substantial benefits for customers including improved water pressure. The programme will continue for the next three years with further planned investment of £90 million.

### Water Pipe System

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much water is lost through leakages in the pipe system. (AQW 5724/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is continuing to undertake a major programme of leakage detection and repair to reduce overall water losses. During the 2007/08 financial year the level of water lost through the water distribution network and customers' private supply pipes was almost 157 million litres per day.

NIW is currently reviewing the methodology for assessing the reported levels of water lost through the distribution system and this will be reflected in the figures from 2008/09 onwards.

### Water Pipe System

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development the percentage of the water system in North Down has asbestos lagging on the pipes and when these will be replaced. (AQW 5732/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that there are approximately 560 kilometres of water mains in the North Down area of which 17 kilometres (approximately 3%) 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.

### Water Pipe System

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development the annual costs of leakages in the water pipe system. (AQW 5735/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that, based on the operating costs of producing water, the cost of water lost through the distribution network during the 2007/08 financial year equated to approximately £5 million.

### Road Traffic Accidents

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail road traffic accidents involving Metro and Ulsterbus vehicles in East Antrim in 2008. (AQW 5759/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The number of road traffic accidents involving services operating from the depots at Larne and Newtownabbey, including services provided in Ballyclare and Larne was 157. The figure comprises all accidents including those where other vehicles were not involved. Fourteen of the accidents involved personal injuries reported at the time of the accident.

### Clearing Litter

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department has spent on clearing litter in each of the last five years, and what responsibility his Department has for cleaning litter. (AQW 5764/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Article 7 of the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 places a duty on Councils to ensure that all roads within their area, with the exception of designated roads, are, so far as is practical, kept clear of litter. Responsibility for keeping designated roads clear of litter rests with my Department's Roads Service. Designated roads include the motorway network, the Ballymena Bypass and a section of the A8.

In the last five financial years Roads Service has spent the following on the sweeping and cleaning of designated roads:-

- 2003/04 - £116,000;
- 2004/05 - £137,000;
- 2005/06 - £119,000;
- 2006/07 - £100,000; and
- 2007/08 - £92,000.

### A5 Upgrade

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the A5 upgrade will include a by-pass for the village of Newbuildings. (AQW 5773/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that the A5 dualling project will include a by-pass for Newbuildings. It is not yet decided whether this stretch of road will be to the east or west of Newbuildings. It is anticipated that the preferred route will be announced this summer.

### Upgraded A5 and A6 Routes

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to linking the upgraded A5 and A6 routes in the south east of Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 5774/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service commissioned consultants in June 2008 to examine existing proposals, by Roads Service and the National Roads Authority, to improve the primary road network approaching Derry and to consider how traffic, on these proposed roads, could best be distributed into and around the city.

This commission has been extended to consider, as a priority, the feasibility of a link between the A6 and A5. This work will consider if such a link has merit and to make recommendations. A report is expected by summer 2009.

### Lagan Ferroviai

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) if Lagan-Ferroviai has a permit to carry out quarrying operations on the roadside 300 yards south of Cloughogue roundabout adjacent to three housing developments and a primary school; and if so, what environmental protection does the permit ask them to observe; and (ii) what his Department is doing to monitor the situation in relation to air and other pollution. (AQW 5836/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that Lagan Ferroviai has undertaken extensive rock excavation by blasting south of Cloughogue roundabout, as an integral part of the construction of the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue dual carriageway scheme, in particular, for the new flyover type junction planned for this location. While the rock blasting operations south of Cloughogue are substantially complete, other construction processes are continuing at this location.

Road Service's contractor on site is required to employ current good practice in relation to these construction processes, to ensure all necessary and appropriate measures are implemented, to minimise the nuisance and disruption experienced at properties in the vicinity of the work.

Amey Lagan Roads Ltd, Roads Service's Design Build Finance and Operate Contractor, and Lagan Ferroviai, the Construction Contractor, attend regular Liaison Meetings with elected representatives, community representatives and Roads Service personnel. These meetings are facilitated by the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council, and any matters of concern arising from the construction works are considered. Amey Lagan Roads Ltd has also appointed Anne Monaghan as a Community Liaison Officer, to act as a point of contact, between individuals, communities and the contractor.

Roads Service cannot confirm that the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council have specifically undertaken air quality monitoring, at properties south of Cloughogue. However, Roads Service understand that such monitoring has been undertaken elsewhere on the site, and monitoring of the rock blasting is continuing.

I have arranged for my Roads Service officials to bring your enquiry directly to the Contractor's attention, asking that the matter be investigated without delay and appropriate action taken, if required. A report will be provided at the forthcoming Liaison Meeting, which is scheduled for Friday 13 March 2009.

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many billing complaints Northern Ireland Water received since this was out-sourced. (AQW 5840/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a total of 3,865 complaints related to billing have been received since the contract with Crystal Alliance was established in October 2006.

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many staff in Northern Ireland Water are absent due to stress as a result of an increased work load. (AQW 5841/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that at 5 March 2009, 11 staff were recorded as being absent from work due to stress related illnesses. There is no indication that any of the absences were attributable to increased workload.

### Bramblewood Development

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answers to AQW 518/08 and AQW 2107/08, if (i) the remedial work in the Bramblewood development has taken place; (ii) the road and sewers have been adopted; and (iii) any legal action has been taken against the developer. (AQW 5849/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that it will liaise with the developer to ascertain the work still to be carried out to bring the streets and footway to adoption standard. If the developer is unwilling to complete the necessary works, Roads Service will have the works carried out, adopt the streets and recover the costs.

I have also been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the developer has completed the necessary remedial work to bring the sewers at Bramblewood up to an acceptable standard for adoption. Northern Ireland Water expects to adopt the sewers in the development at the end of August 2009, following the expiry of an agreed maintenance period.

I can advise that to date it has not been necessary to take legal action against the developer.

### Roads Service

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to increase the resources available to Roads Service Southern Division for more effective maintenance of minor roads and prevent further deterioration. (AQW 5902/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service budget is allocated to its four Divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators, tailored to each maintenance activity. Divisions use these indicators when apportioning across council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds

I can assure the member that the structural integrity of the roads network remains a high priority for Roads Service. You may be interested to note that the outcome of the Budget 2008-2011, means that Roads Service's total funding for structural maintenance in 2009/10 will increase to £71.8 million, compared with the initial allocation of £56.3 million in 2008/09.

### Review of Public Administration

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Regional Development which functions will transfer from his Department to local government under the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 6018/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** On 31 March 2008, Minister Foster, the then Minister of the Environment, announced that responsibility for the public realm aspects of local roads functions will transfer to local government. The local roads public realm responsibilities listed for transfer include Roads Service work in relation to:-

- streetscaping;
- town and city centre environmental improvements;
- grass cutting and weed spraying;
- gully emptying;
- street lighting;

- off-street parking;
- pedestrian permits;
- maintenance of amenity areas;
- alley-gating;
- permitting local events to be held on roads; and
- salting of footways.

The functions detailed above are currently being considered further by Central and Local Government, with a view to agreeing a defined list of functions that will transfer to Local Government in May 2011.

### Public Transport: Lisburn/Sprucefield

**Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to improve public transport linkages between Lisburn City Centre and Sprucefield. (AQO 2232/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Following my meeting with a delegation from Lisburn City Council in July 2008, I understand that officials from Translink and my Department met the Council to discuss, among other things, improved linkages between Sprucefield shopping centre and Lisburn city centre. I am informed by Translink that it considers services between the two to be adequate from 7:00 AM to 9:00 PM. Translink cannot commit to additional services at this time but is considering a pre booking service for passengers using night time buses to Dublin and wanting to board at Sprucefield. Translink is also considering the possibility of the Belfast/Enniskillen and Belfast/Armagh services stopping at Sprucefield with onward links to Lisburn.

### Fuel Oil: Translink

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what costs have been or will be incurred by Translink in buying fuel oil for buses and trains over (i) the last two quarters; and (ii) the next three quarters. (AQO 2233/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In this quarter and the last quarter Translink paid £6.9m for bus fuel and £2.9m for train fuel.

Over the next three quarters Translink will pay £10.8m for bus fuel and £4.6m for train fuel.

These fuel costs are on a net basis i.e. they exclude taxes and commissions. They also exclude the small percentage of fuel not purchased under forward contracts, approximately 10%, where it is not possible to forecast market prices payable.

### Rapid Transport Scheme

**Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of progress on the Belfast rapid transport scheme. (AQO 2234/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am pleased with progress on the development of a new Rapid Transit System for Belfast.

At present, the newly-formed Rapid Transit Division within my Department is examining all the route options for the 3 routes in the pilot study (Titanic Quarter, East Belfast and West Belfast) to confirm the findings of the Strategic Outline Case. Once this is complete they will move into the preliminary design stage for the best route alignments, when site surveys and the required statutory assessments will be undertaken. The preliminary designs for each route will form the basis for public consultation which will afford people the opportunity to make their views known and influence how the project is implemented.

My Department has also completed land purchase for a park and ride site at Millmount in the East of the city and is investigating the legal basis under which the system will be implemented.

## A26 Dualling

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the dualling of the A26.

(AQO 2235/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service is progressing plans for the provision of a 7 km stretch of dual carriageway on the A26, between Glarryford and the A44 Drones Road. This is one of the major projects included in the ten year Investment Delivery Plan for Roads.

In August 2008, I announced the preferred route, which closely follows the existing corridor. The route is currently being taken through the final stage of the scheme assessment process. This will culminate in the publication of an Environmental Statement and draft Orders, for planning and land acquisition, which I would anticipate occurring during the 2009/10 financial year.

It is anticipated that construction will commence in the latter part of the Investment Delivery Plan period.

## Trains: Larne Line

**Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Regional Development when the order for new trains will be placed and if they will operate on the Larne line.

(AQO 2236/09)

**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 with the procurement exercise. 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.

## Rapid Transport Scheme

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to extending the proposed Belfast rapid transport scheme to Lisburn, Newtownards and Newtownabbey.

(AQO 2237/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Rapid Transit System will initially operate on three pilot routes running to East Belfast, West Belfast and Titanic Quarter via the City Centre.

Consideration will be given to proposals to provide extension of the RT System to the North and South of the City.

The decision on when to progress the extension(s) of the network will depend on the levels of funding available and, to some degree, on the success of the 3 pilot routes.

It is also important that we investigate the possibility of developer contributions at this stage so that such opportunities are not missed.

At present there are no plans to extend the Rapid Transit System outside of the greater Belfast area.

## Regional Transportation Strategy: Greenhouse Gases

**Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Regional Development what contribution the Regional Transportation Strategy will make to the reduction of greenhouse gases.

(AQO 2238/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Regional Transportation Strategy has been the catalyst for a number of measures that will assist in reducing greenhouse gases here. For example, the investment in improving public transport, both in terms of newer vehicles, services and routes, the use of more sustainable types of fuel for public transport, the TravelWise initiative seeking to encourage smarter travel, including walking and cycling, and gauging the public attitude to reducing transport emissions, etc.

The Strategy is being reviewed and will explore what further enhancement to existing measures can be provided to reducing greenhouse emissions. I am keen that my Department maximises its contribution to the Executive's commitment to reduce greenhouse gases through challenging targets and outcomes.

## Public Transport Reform

**Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on public transport reform, and to detail what progress has been made and a timeframe for the reform. (AQO 2239/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The public transport reforms, which will be designed to comply with EU Regulation 1370/2007, aim to introduce new contractual arrangements for the delivery of public transport. The options for how best to introduce new organisational arrangements that will support the reforms are currently being addressed as part of the development of an Outline Business Case. This will be completed shortly. It is planned to undertake a public consultation exercise on the reforms later this year, after which policy proposals for any required legislative changes would be introduced to the Assembly.

## Collaborative Spatial Planning Framework

**Mr Molloy** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress been made on the collaborative spatial planning framework for the north-west and across the island of Ireland. (AQO 2240/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department, jointly with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, has prepared two draft cross-border spatial planning frameworks. The first, entitled "Spatial Strategies on the Island of Ireland: A Framework for Collaboration", sets out a rationale for cross-border spatial planning in a European, North-South and east-west context. The second, entitled "North West Gateway Spatial Framework", provides spatial planning guidance for the North West Gateway Initiative. These frameworks deal with cross-cutting issues and I am bringing them forward to the Executive.

## Fuel Oil: Translink

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what changes are being considered by Translink in relation to the purchasing of fuel to ensure best value for money. (AQO 2241/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have no direct involvement in the negotiation and approval of Translink's fuel purchasing function. 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 the agreement of all contracts entered into by NITHC and delegates day to day operational issues to its executive team.

Translink have not indicated any change to their current arrangements which run up to June 2010. Translink anticipate that fuel costs will fall from June 2009 under current contracts.

## Rural Transport

**Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of plans to slash rural transport and the importance of developing integrated public transport services. (AQO 2242/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** There is no plan to slash rural transportation and I recognise the importance of integrated public transport services.

My officials are in negotiation with NITHC/Translink with respect to the development of the Translink Corporate Plan for 2009/10. Within this exercise financial plans have to be agreed to ensure Translink meets its financial obligations. This plan will have to be agreed by me, and this process is still ongoing.

Translink, itself, is an example of an integrated public transport company covering both bus and rail. There are no plans to change this status.

## Translink Passenger Charter: Punctuality Targets

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the Translink Passenger Charter punctuality targets. (AQO 2243/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The punctuality targets in the Translink Passenger's Charter have been in place for some years and are subject to periodic review.

The rail targets are similar to ones used by rail operators in the UK and RoI, and while bus comparisons are more difficult to make, it is the view of my Department, the Consumer Council and Translink that the punctuality targets in the Charter are realistic and challenging.

### Roadside Trees

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the responsibility of his Department in ensuring that roadside trees do not fall on passing vehicles. (AQO 2244/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has a statutory duty to maintain the public road network, which includes ensuring that boundary trees or hedges do not overgrow the roadway and footway, thereby impeding road users and pedestrians.

The statutory obligation requires that Roads Service initially advise the adjacent land owner, responsible for the overgrowing hedge, requesting that the necessary remedial work to remove or cut the trees or hedges is carried out in the interests of public safety. This is normally undertaken by the issue of an informal letter which generally resolves the majority of the problems identified. If that fails, Roads Service has powers, under Article 50 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, to serve a notice on the land owner requiring that the tree or hedge is removed or cut back, so as to remove the danger or obstruction. Where the requirements of the notice are not complied with, Roads Service may carry out the necessary works and recover the costs from the land owner.

### Regional Development Strategy: Fundamental Review

**Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the fundamental review of the Regional Development Strategy and to detail what public engagement has taken place to date. (AQO 2245/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department has been working on the revised RDS taking account of the comments and advice it has received. My intention is to present a draft document to Ministers by May this year.

My officials have been meeting with the Regional Development Committee on a monthly basis to update them on progress and to gauge their views. I also met with Ministerial colleagues in an Executive Sub Group and a further meeting is taking place on 12 March. An External Working Group was established to provide specialist advice and 3 meetings have taken place.

During November and early December 2008 my officials held a series of stakeholder events on the basis of the proposed new Council areas. The purpose of these was to hear local views on challenges and issues facing their areas.

## DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Social Housing Projects

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Social Development to list all social housing projects (i) for this year and (ii) planned for next year, and the value of the each investment. (AQW 5502/09)

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie):** I have attached at Appendix 1 a list of all newbuild schemes either started or anticipated to start during this financial year. The total cost of these schemes is £111.8m

At Appendix 2 I also attach a list of all improvement schemes scheduled for this year. The draft Social Housing Development Programme for 2009-2014 has not yet been approved and I am unable to provide you with that information at this stage. In addition the Northern Ireland Housing Executive are currently reassessing their improvement schemes for 2009/10 based on the resources available to them and as such that information is also not yet available.

**APPENDIX 1**  
**ACTUAL NEWBUILD STARTS 2008/2009**

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Number of Dwellings	Client Group
Belfast Community	BCHA West Belfast Acquisitions Phase 4A	1	General Needs
Belfast Community	Acquisitions, Polelgass, Phase 4A	7	General Needs
Belfast Community	East Belfast Acquisitions, Phase 2A	4	General Needs
Belfast Community	East Belfast Acquisitions, Phase 2B	10	General Needs
Belfast Community	East Belfast Acquisitions, Phase 2C	7	General Needs
Belfast Community	2 Cherryvale Avenue, Newtownabbey	1	Physically Disabled
Belfast Community	Carrickvale Manor, Lurgan	10	General Needs
BIH	94 & 97 Hornbeam Road, Dunmurry	2	General Needs
BIH	29-31 Beechmount Avenue, Belfast	5	General Needs
BIH	16 Iniscarn Close, Lisburn	1	General Needs
BIH	Chequer Hill, Armagh Road, Newry	33	General Needs
Clanmil	24 Glenville Green, Newtownabbey	1	General Needs
Clanmil	46 Inisharoon Court, Newtownards	1	General Needs
Clanmil	Foxhill, Derry	5	General Needs
Clanmil	The Bush, Dungannon	6	General Needs
Clanmil	Wolfhill Manor, Ligoniel Road, North Belfast	8	General Needs
Clanmil	Sydney Street West, Belfast	4	General Needs
Clanmil	Church Lane, High Street, Donaghadee	6	General Needs
Clanmil	Pottingers Quay, Belfast	27	General Needs
Connswater	14 Lisvarna Place, Belfast	1	General Needs
Connswater	31-35 Donaghadee Road, Newtownards	40	General Needs
Flax	Ardoyne Acquisitions, Phase 7E, Belfast	2	General Needs
Flax	Ardoyne Acquisitions, Phase 8A, Belfast	1	General Needs
Fold	33 Rossnagalliagh, Galliagh, Derry	1	General Needs
Fold	1 Lawnfield Court, Newcastle	1	General Needs
Fold	PSNI Site, Downpatrick Road, Ardglass	11	General Needs
Grove	1 St Aubyn Street, Belfast	1	General Needs
Grove	North Belfast Acquisitions, Phase 1C	2	General Needs
Habinteg	Derry Acquisitions Phase 12	9	General Needs
Habinteg	22 Templemore Street, Belfast	1	General Needs
Habinteg	Greater West Belfast DPF Acquisitions	3	General Needs
Habinteg	Lourdes Hall, Waterloo Place, Londonderry	13	General Needs
Habinteg	Slatequarry Road, Cullyhanna, Newry	6	General Needs
Newington	15 Atlantic Avenue, Belfast	1	General Needs
Newington	14 Willowbank Gardens, Belfast	1	General Needs
Newington	52 Carlisle Road, Belfast	1	General Needs
Newington	124-126 Antrim Road, Belfast	6	General Needs
North & West	West Bank, Ph16A, Londonderry	10	General Needs

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Number of Dwellings	Client Group
North & West	West Bank, Ph16B, Londonderry	10	General Needs
North & West	Dove Gardens, Phase 1, Londonderry	63	General Needs
Oaklee	7 Iris Walk, Belfast	1	General Needs
Oaklee	5 Tynan Close, Newtownabbey	1	General Needs
Oaklee	18L Duncairn Parade, Belfast	1	General Needs
Oaklee	Antrim Road, Belfast	6	General Needs
Oaklee	79 Thornhill Drive, Dromore	1	General Needs
Oaklee	Ellis Street, Carrickfergus	18	Learning Disabilities
Oaklee	Shaftesbury Road, Bangor	34	Elderly
Oaklee	Longlands, Newtownabbey	50	General Needs
Oaklee	Longlands, Newtownabbey	6	General Needs
Oaklee	7a Glen Road, Derry City	6	General Needs
Oaklee	Throne Retail Park, Whitewell Road, Belfast	11	General Needs
Rural	2&3 Ashgrove Court, Newtownbutler	2	General Needs
Rural	7&8 Beech Tree Lane, Tempo	2	General Needs
Rural	Culowen, Blackwatertown, Co Armagh	6	General Needs
South Ulster	The Hollows, New Mills, Dungannon	9	General Needs
South Ulster	Ballygowan/Levin/Meadowbrook	25	General Needs
South Ulster	Mark Street, Lurgan	22	General Needs
Triangle	North East Buy Backs	2	General Needs
Triangle	Station Road, Dunloy	4	General Needs
Triangle	18 Coronation Park, Clough	1	General Needs
Triangle	12 Alan Close, Newcastle	6	Learning Disabilities
Trinity	38 - 40 Bryansburn Road, Bangor	11	Elderly
Trinity	Church Street, Newtownards	20	Elderly
Trinity	115 - 117 Hamilton Road, Bangor	5	Elderly
Trinity	38 Belfast Road, Comber	10	Elderly
Ulidia	7 Drumbawn Close, Enniskillen	1	General Needs
<b>Total Starts. 66 Schemes 584 Units</b>			

**ANTICIPATED NEWBUILD STARTS 2008/2009**

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Dwellings	Client Group
Ark	Greenvale House Rossmore Dr, Belfast	11	Learning Difficulties
BIH	3 & 5 Ashgrove Road, Newry	16	General Needs
BIH	1-3 Crawfordsburn Road, Bangor	21	Elderly
BIH	Abbots Cross, Newtownabbey	13	Learning Difficulties
Clanmil	Seymour Street, Lisburn	48	Elderly
Clanmil	Grange Meadows, Kilkeel	8	General Needs
Connswater	Trinity Place, Lisburn	15	General Needs
Flax	Ballybone, Oldpark, Belfast	15	General Needs

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Dwellings	Client Group
Fold	Upritchard Court, Bangor	14	General Needs
Fold	Guide Street, Broughshane	4	Elderly
Fold	23 Cairnshill Court, Belfast	1	General Needs
Fold	24 Cairnshill Court, Belfast	1	General Needs
Fold	Fairy Glen, Crossmaglen	18	General Needs
Fold	Torrens Phase 3a	112	General Needs
Habinteg	Clanrye Avenue, Newry	7	General Needs
Hearth	Re-Improvement, Glenarm	13	General Needs
Oaklee	Library Site, Sion Mills, Strabane	3	General Needs
Oaklee	St Gall's Site, Ph 2, Belfast	8	General Needs
Oaklee	Pond Park, Lisburn	112	General Needs
Rural	60 The Old Mill, Killyleagh	1	General Needs
St Matthews	27 Woodside Walk, Poleglass	1	General Needs
St Matthews	2A Beechfield Street, Belfast	8	Elderly
Triangle	107 A North Road, Belfast	8	General Needs
Trinity	70 Sunnyside Street, Belfast	12	General Needs
Trinity	Stradreagh Challenging Behaviour Unit, Londonderry	18	Learning Difficulties
Ulidia	The Ferns, Rostrevor Road, Hilltown. Newry	10	General Needs
Various	Existing Satisfactory Purchases (DPF)	25	General Needs
<b>Total Anticipated Starts. 27 Schemes 523 Units</b>			

## APPENDIX 2 IMPROVEMENT SCHEMES

Northern Ireland Housing Executive District	Type of Work	Scheme Name	Dwellings	Start Date	Estimated Cost
Castlereagh	Ext Cyclic Maint	Tullycarnet 1	164	28-Apr-08	294,000.00
Ballycastle	Ext Cyclic Maint	Ballycastle	167	16-Jun-08	275,346.00
Lisburn Antrim Street	Ext Cyclic Maint	Manor, Jubilee, Warren & Ward	274	27-Jun-08	404,239.00
Dungannon	Ext Cyclic Maint	Coalisland/Gortgonis	151	30-Jun-08	227,708.00
Newtownabbey 1	Ext Cyclic Maint	Newtownabbey	194	30-Jun-08	308,301.00
Armagh	Ext Cyclic Maint	Killylea/Orangefield/Ballinaho	153	30-Jun-08	225,970.00
Portadown	Ext Cyclic Maint	Obins/Parkside/Ballyoran/Garvaghy	240	25-Aug-08	303,823.00
Waterside	Ext Cyclic Maint	Waterside Urban-Hollymount/Claudy	175	01-Sep-08	288,459.00
Collon Terrace	Ext Cyclic Maint	Bloomfield/Moss/Slievemore	221	01-Sep-08	659,297.00
Belfast Region	Ext Cyclic Maint	Ballysillan	73	20-Oct-08	130,134.00
Carrickfergus	Ext Cyclic Maint	Carrickfergus	254	15-Dec-08	297,121.00
Fermanagh	Ext Cyclic Maint	Irvinstown/Kesh/Ederney	200	19-Jan-09	151,600.00
North Belfast	Ext Cyclic Maint	Ballysillan Phase 2	101	09-Feb-09	293,814.00
Carrickfergus	Grounds Maintenance	Woodburn	0	14-Apr-08	218,630.00
Antrim	Grounds Maintenance	Parkhall	0	01-Jan-09	149,428.00

<b>Northern Ireland Housing Executive District</b>	<b>Type of Work</b>	<b>Scheme Name</b>	<b>Dwellings</b>	<b>Start Date</b>	<b>Estimated Cost</b>
North Belfast	H&S (Asbestos)	Mount Vernon	99	23-Feb-09	237,715.00
Lisburn Antrim Street	Revenue Repair	Moynes Emergency/L1 Lighting	112	12-Jan-09	156,420.00
Castlereagh	Revenue Repair	Westwinds Stairwell Window Replace	88	26-Jan-09	374,000.00
East Belfast	Revenue Replacement	Lord Street/Trillick	112	19-May-08	407,354.00
Fermanagh	Revenue Replacement	Erne Pk/Loughview Dr	91	27-May-08	482,500.00
Coleraine	Revenue Replacement	Ballysally	68	02-Jun-08	249,458.00
South Belfast	Revenue Replacement	Donegall Pass Phase 3	72	02-Jun-08	277,460.00
South Belfast	Revenue Replacement	Abingdon	77	16-Jun-08	273,708.00
Waterside	Revenue Replacement	De Glin Pk/Primity Gdns	62	23-Jun-08	246,014.00
West Belfast	Revenue Replacement	Irwell/Thames/Broadway	55	23-Jun-08	348,812.00
Waterloo Place	Revenue Replacement	Greenwalk/Long Tower Ct/Mulroy	142	23-Jun-08	643,417.00
Collon Terrace	Revenue Replacement	Friel Cl/Gogarty Cl	106	23-Jun-08	415,982.00
Collon Terrace	Revenue Replacement	Bracken Park/ Collon Lane	65	23-Jun-08	240,041.00
Antrim	Revenue Replacement	Greystone Ph 2	113	26-Jun-08	301,913.00
East Belfast	Revenue Replacement	Short Strand Phase 3	101	26-Jun-08	317,236.00
Castlereagh	Revenue Replacement	Cregagh Ph 3	72	27-Jun-08	300,000.00
Bangor	Revenue Replacement	Loughview	99	27-Jun-08	281,000.00
Lisburn Antrim Street	Revenue Replacement	Ballymacoss	64	27-Jun-08	219,000.00
Newtownards	Revenue Replacement	Greyabbey/Kircubbin/Portaferry	36	27-Jun-08	126,000.00
Fermanagh	Revenue Replacement	Cleenish Pk/Lisgoole Pk	59	30-Jun-08	279,158.00
Fermanagh	Revenue Replacement	Drumbawn/Derrychara	44	30-Jun-08	228,361.00
Newry	Revenue Replacement	South Armagh Various Estates	75	30-Jun-08	325,943.00
North Belfast	Revenue Replacement	Carlisle	5	15-Sep-08	249,750.00
Collon Terrace	Revenue Replacement	Grainan Dr/Grainan Pk Etc	22	15-Sep-08	156,133.00
Coleraine	Revenue Replacement	Ballysally Area	107	03-Dec-08	357,723.00
Newtownabbey 1	Revenue Replacement	Ardmillan Dr/Ardgart Pl Etc	101	05-Jan-09	295,917.00
Shankill	Revenue Replacement	Dover Street Ph 3/Brown Square	65	14-Jan-09	258,295.00
West Belfast	Revenue Replacement	Leeson Street	71	14-Jan-09	274,649.00
Lurgan Brownlow	Revenue Replacement	Drumbeg North	50	19-Jan-09	222,417.00
Strabane	Revenue Replacement	Carlton Drive Estate	123	19-Jan-09	524,720.00
Ballymoney	Revenue Replacement	Rasharkin/Millicent	83	26-Jan-09	326,053.00
Newtownards	Revenue Replacement	Scrabo	148	26-Jan-09	894,167.00
Castlereagh	Revenue Replacement	Braniel Ph 2	123	26-Jan-09	568,034.00
Portadown	Revenue Replacement	Portadown	45	09-Feb-09	185,032.00
Dungannon	Revenue Replacement	Springfield Cr/Bernagh Etc	53	09-Feb-09	230,549.00
Newtownards	Smoke Alarm Install	Se Area	1421	01-Apr-08	102,000.00
Belfast Region	Smoke Alarm Install	10yr S/Alarms (Heat) Phase 1	500	01-May-08	174,057.00
Strabane	Clean Air Conversion	Strabane Clean Air Conversion	39	23-Jun-08	203,885.00

<b>Northern Ireland Housing Executive District</b>	<b>Type of Work</b>	<b>Scheme Name</b>	<b>Dwellings</b>	<b>Start Date</b>	<b>Estimated Cost</b>
Newtownards	Environmental Improvement	Bowtown Ph1	0	02-Jun-08	853,245.00
Lisburn Dairyfarm	Environmental Improvement	Glenwood Woodside Boundary Wks	0	12-Jan-09	214,000.00
Omagh	Environmental Improvement	Strathroy	0	12-Jan-09	174,484.00
Bangor	Health & Safety Schemes	Communal Areas/Ecm:church Green	81	20-Oct-08	438,000.00
West Belfast	Health & Safety Schemes	Roden Street/ Underpinning	17	23-Feb-09	118,000.00
Newtownards	Heating Installation	Se Area	30	01-Apr-08	145,776.00
Ballymena	Heating Installation	Ballymena Area	40	01-Apr-08	220,000.00
Bangor	Heating Installation	K'ilcooley/Churchill	91	01-Apr-08	399,648.00
West/Nw Region	Heating Installation	Emergency Scheme	40	01-Apr-08	102,000.00
Waterside	Heating Installation	Primity Cres/Terrace	21	07-Apr-08	110,951.00
Newtownabbey 1	Heating Installation	Newtownabbey 1 Ph 6	100	07-Apr-08	531,281.00
Banbridge	Heating Installation	Cline Rd/Edenderry Ph 2	82	07-Apr-08	400,216.00
Shankill	Heating Installation	Shankill	66	14-Apr-08	277,517.00
Belfast Region	Heating Installation	Emergency	60	01-May-08	288,161.00
South Region	Heating Installation	Gather Up	50	06-May-08	301,374.00
Newry	Heating Installation	Mullaghbawn/Drumintee/Forkhill	39	19-May-08	196,571.00
North Belfast	Heating Installation	North & East	28	26-May-08	121,983.00
Downpatrick	Heating Installation	Windmill	42	26-May-08	263,000.00
Limavady	Heating Installation	Ard-Na-Smoll/Gortnaghey	43	02-Jun-08	280,989.00
Ballycastle	Heating Installation	Bushmills	102	23-Jun-08	485,875.00
Magherafelt	Heating Installation	Alexander Pk/Desertmartin Etc	60	23-Jun-08	270,000.00
Lisburn Dairyfarm	Heating Installation	Twinbrook/Poleglass	56	28-Jul-08	264,000.00
Fermanagh	Heating Installation	Lisbellaw/Mayobridge/ Brookeborough	29	04-Aug-08	197,555.00
Newtownards	Heating Installation	Movilla & Open Fires Ph 1	51	01-Sep-08	246,948.00
Collon Terrace	Heating Installation	Stephen/Synge/Joyce Ct	55	06-Oct-08	309,420.00
Lurgan Brownlow	Heating Installation	Meadowbrook	65	06-Oct-08	352,476.00
Collon Terrace	Heating Installation	Sheelin Pk/O'connor Ct (Ph 2)	40	13-Oct-08	227,870.00
Belfast Region	Heating Installation	Emergency One Off's	40	01-Nov-08	191,602.00
Newtownards	Heating Installation	Movilla & Open Fires Ph 2	88	26-Jan-09	429,791.00
Antrim	Heating Installation	Greystone	184	26-Jan-09	1,025,759.00
Waterloo Place	Heating Installation	Long Tower Ct/Durrow Pk	62	02-Feb-09	337,400.00
Fermanagh	Heating Installation	Newtownbutler/Rosslea/Donagh	104	09-Feb-09	647,762.00
Newry	Multi Element	Slievshan Park Flats 8a-8f	6	19-May-08	275,413.00
Antrim	Multi Element	Townparks North Bungalows	31	02-Jun-08	1,089,600.00
Lisburn Antrim Street	Multi Element	Ballymacoss	49	30-Jun-08	1,763,220.00

Northern Ireland Housing Executive District	Type of Work	Scheme Name	Dwellings	Start Date	Estimated Cost
Waterloo Place	Multi Element	Alexander Memorial Cottages	6	08-Sep-08	227,700.00
North Belfast	Multi Element	Whitewell Phase 3	9	09-Feb-09	334,000.00
Dungannon	Single Element	Eastvale/ Charlemont St	37	05-Jan-09	816,000.00

### Housing Executive Properties

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties are awaiting repairs before they can be allocated. (AQW 5569/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** At 31 January 2009, 1189 Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties were awaiting repairs or major improvement works being completed before they could be allocated.

### Ten-Day Payment Target

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister for Social Development how much of the total amount due to suppliers has been paid within the ten-day payment target. (AQW 5642/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Having recently gone live on the new Account NI automated payment system in November 2008, the Department for Social Development is striving to meet the 10 day payment target for all invoices as soon as possible. During February 2009, the Department cleared 70% of supplier invoices within the 10 day target, which equated to some £8.2m of the total £12.2m invoiced.

### Housing Benefit

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development whether the present downturn in the economy has resulted in an increase in numbers applying for Housing Benefit and, if so, whether the necessary staff are in place to cope with the situation. (AQW 5647/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** There have been significantly higher numbers of transactions (25%) including new claims and higher numbers of changes in circumstances. In view of this increase in demand, the Housing Executive is currently implementing a plan to increase Housing Benefit resources.

### Benefit Fraud

**Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the measures and initiatives her Department is currently undertaking to identify persons guilty of benefit fraud, and what her Department is doing to ensure that genuine applicants receive the service they deserve. (AQW 5654/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Social Security Agency has a robust counter fraud strategy which has led to a reduction in estimated levels of fraud from £60m (1.88% of expenditure) in 2001 to £12.7m (0.35% of expenditure) in 2007. Some of the measures and initiatives that the Agency uses to identify persons who may be guilty of benefit fraud are set out below:-

- Regular electronic Data Matching of benefit records with other government departments and private organisations to identify cases where incorrect information may have been supplied.
- Arrangements that allow information from other government departments and public organisations to be provided.
- A dedicated telephone line that allows members of the public to report in confidence customers who may be committing benefit fraud, also a secure internet link on the Department's Web Site.

- from the Social Security Agency and the Republic of Ireland's Department for Social and Family Affairs meet regularly to discuss operations aimed at detecting individuals committing benefit fraud in a cross-border scenario.

The level of customer service the Agency provides is covered by a range of quantitative and qualitative targets. These include accuracy and clearance time targets that are published in the Department's Strategic and Business Plan. At present 19 out of 20 operational service delivery targets are either being achieved or are on course to being achieved. Further customer service improvements through the introduction of enhanced IT systems and new telephony are being developed under the Agency's Modernisation Programme. In addition, the Agency is seeking to provide full entitlement amongst current customers and other members of the public through the Benefit Uptake Programme.

## Housing Benefit

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) the length of time it takes to process new Housing Benefit claims in the West Region; (ii) if targets for processing claims are being maintained; and (iii) whether her budget is adequate to deal with processing claims. (AQW 5672/09)

### The Minister for Social Development:

- The target timescale for new Housing Benefit claims is to process 100% of new claims (where all required information has been provided) within 14 days.
- Housing Benefit applications within the Housing Executive's West area are processed by the Derry and Omagh Housing Benefits units. The most recently available figures regarding the processing of new Housing Benefit claims within the West Area administrative boundaries (where all required information had been supplied ) demonstrate that:
  - In January 2009 the Housing Executive's Derry Housing Benefit unit assessed 74% within 14 days;
  - In January 2009 the Housing Executive's Omagh Housing Benefit unit assessed 90% within 14 days.
- There have been significantly higher numbers of transactions including new claims and higher numbers of changes in circumstances. In view of this increase in demand, the Housing Executive is currently implementing a plan to increase the Housing Benefit resources.

## Social Housing Projects

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the social housing projects currently underway in the Lagan Valley constituency, and the total value of each investment. (AQW 5720/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information is not available by parliamentary constituency. The Housing Executive's Lisburn and Banbridge District Offices include the areas which comprise the Lagan Valley Constituency. The table below details the social housing projects currently under way and the total value of each investment.

Housing Executive District Office	Scheme	Cost
Lisburn	Moynes Emergency Lighting	£156k
	South East Lightning Conductors	£89k
	Ballymacoss Multi Element	£1,763k
	Priory Close Multi Element	£849k
	Glencairn Multi Element	£530k
	Manor/Jubilee External cyclical maintenance	£404k
Banbridge	Parkhill Multi Element	£829k

### Housing Executive

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development the number of vacant Housing Executive properties in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5730/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information requested is not available by parliamentary constituency. However, there are 313 vacant properties in the Housing Executive's Bangor and Newtownards District Offices (which include the areas which comprise the North Down constituency).

### Ballyclare Environmental Improvement Scheme

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Social Development in relation to the Ballyclare Environmental Improvement Scheme (i) if the costs have increased; (ii) why they have increased; and (iii) which agencies will contribute additional finance to address any extra costs which have been incurred. (AQW 5766/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I can confirm that the costs for this scheme increased due to unforeseen work; the inclusion of additional improvements to widen the footpaths, installing new railings, replacing trees, relocating street lighting columns and accommodating site restrictions to alleviate traffic congestion at peak times. The additional funding is being provided by my Department, the Department of Regional Development's Roads Service and Newtownabbey Borough Council.

### Hope Centre in Ballymena

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Social Development what he is doing to prevent the Hope Centre in Ballymena from closing. (AQW 5771/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Department for Social Development funded a three year project to support the development of volunteering under the Community Volunteering Scheme. This project funding will end in March 2009 and there are no further DSD funding streams available to support the work of the Centre, whose principal activities fall under the general area of responsibility of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

### Warm Homes Scheme

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) when the new Warm Homes Scheme will commence (ii) what arrangements will be in place for the delivery of the scheme; (iii) what advantages will accrue through participation in the programme; and (iv) what households will be eligible to apply. (AQW 5772/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The evaluation of all applications to deliver the Warm Homes Scheme 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.

The Warm Homes Scheme will be aimed at vulnerable, fuel poor households who could not afford to fund the energy efficiency measures required to reduce their fuel bills themselves. The Scheme will fund a range of cost-effective energy efficiency measures tailored to the needs of individual households.

The Scheme will have two elements: Warm Homes and Warm Homes Plus. A summary of the eligibility criteria and measures available under Warm Homes and Warm Homes Plus is shown below.

Warm Homes - Eligibility Criteria	Measures Available
<p>Householder of any age in receipt of one or more of the following benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing Benefit</li> <li>• Rate Rebate</li> <li>• Income Support</li> <li>• Income Related Employment Support Allowance</li> <li>• Income Based Job Seekers Allowance</li> <li>• Pension Credit</li> <li>• Child Tax Credit</li> <li>• Working Tax Credit</li> <li>• Disability Living Allowance</li> <li>• Attendance Allowance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cavity Wall Insulation</li> <li>• Loft Insulation</li> <li>• Hot Water Cylinder Jackets</li> <li>• Benefit Check</li> <li>• Energy Advice</li> </ul>

Warm Homes Plus	Measures Available
<p>Householder of any age who are in receipt of one or more of the following benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing Benefit</li> <li>• Rate Rebate</li> <li>• Income Support</li> <li>• Income Related Employment Support Allowance</li> <li>• Income Based Job Seekers Allowance</li> <li>• Pension Credit</li> <li>• Working Tax Credit</li> </ul> <p>AND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• who are passported through from Warm Homes as their home requires one of the measures available under Warm Homes Plus.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Installation of a fully controllable, energy efficient oil or gas central heating system where no system currently exists;</li> <li>• Conversion of an existing bottled gas (LPG), solid fuel or Economy 7 heating system to a more energy efficient oil or natural gas central heating system;</li> <li>• Insulation requirements which exceed the statutory grant maximum available under Warm Homes</li> <li>• For properties of solid wall construction, further measures may be considered to minimise heat loss or reduce fuel bills. These may include use of solid wall insulation or use of a renewable technology.</li> </ul>

## Housing Executive Estate Strategy

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the delay in Phase 1 of the Housing Executive Estate Strategy for Dunclug. (AQW 5790/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Whilst it had been expected to start work on Phase 1 of this strategy before now, a combination of events has meant that work can not yet start.

A number of issues have arisen out of the Economic Appraisal for Phase 1 which has delayed the approval of that Appraisal. The collapse of the land and property market has also significantly reduced the resources available to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for Environmental Improvement schemes such as this and a review of the 2009/10 programme has been made to identify what resources are now available for schemes, once the necessary approvals are in place.

## Housing Executive Estate Strategy

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Social Development when the Economic Appraisal for phase 1 of the Housing Executive Estate Strategy for Dunclug was passed to the Department of Finance and Personnel for approval. (AQW 5791/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Department completed its technical and professional assessment of this Economic Appraisal on 5 December 2008 and it was referred that same day to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

### Housing Executive Estate Strategy

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Social Development whether funding is in place to deliver phase 1 of the Housing Executive Estate Strategy for Dunclug. (AQW 5792/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The shortfall in receipts resulting from the collapse of the land and property market has forced the Housing Executive to undertake an urgent and immediate review of all its programmes. No decisions have yet been made on the programme of improvement schemes for 2009/10.

### Housing Executive Estate Strategy

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm when work will start on Phase 1 of the Housing Executive Estate Strategy for Dunclug which was due to begin in November 2008. (AQW 5793/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Department is currently working with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to resolve a number of issues regarding the Economic Appraisal for this phase of the project.

Once these are resolved, approvals received and funding identified, work can begin.

### Social Housing

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans are there for the development of social housing in the Ballymacross/Ballymacash area, in the next three years. (AQW 5812/09)

**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](http://www.nihe.gov.uk).

### Social Housing

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans there are for spending on social housing developments and the development of any of her Department's unused sites, to help the construction industry, in the next financial year. (AQW 5866/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The draft Social Housing Development Programme for 2009-2014 has not yet been finalised for approval and I am, therefore, unable to provide you with information on plans and spending at this stage. As part of the process to develop the Programme my officials have been working closely with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to assess the suitability of all surplus sites, including those within my own Department that may be identified for social housing.

I recognise how the Social Housing Development Programme can make a significant contribution to the economy and in particular the construction industry. I have already made the case to my Ministerial colleagues about how an increased investment in social housing could provide an immediate stimulus to the economy and at the same time help those in housing stress.

### Strategic Business Review

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assurance that elderly people will not be disadvantaged as a result of the new service proposed under the Strategic Business Review. (AQW 5867/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Strategic Business Review proposals deal with services delivered to customers of the Social Security Agency's local office network. The vast majority of elderly people do not use the local office network preferring instead to access pension services directly by telephone.

Nevertheless you have my assurance that elderly people or any other customer grouping using the local office network will not be disadvantaged as a result of the Strategic Business Review's proposals.

### Housing Executive

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to reduce the six to seven week period for a vacant Housing Executive house to be offered to a tenant. (AQW 5893/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Housing Executive allocates 94% of its lettable stock within two weeks. Vacant properties which have been held for some time to assist with decanting in improvement schemes are now being reviewed and it is intended to bring these properties back into use.

### Energy Savings for Homes

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development how many enquiries there have been about energy savings for homes in (i) Ards; and (ii) Strangford, in the last financial year. (AQW 5894/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have been advised by Eaga that they do not record details of energy efficiency enquiries and can therefore only report on actual referrals recorded. The number of referrals received in the last financial year for Ards Council Area was 294 and for Strangford constituency were 349.

Northern Ireland Energy Agency (NIEA) is a member of the Bryson Charitable Group who through the management and operation of the Energy Saving Trust Advice centre, offer free and impartial telephone advice to households across Northern Ireland on energy efficiency. NIEA currently hold details of the number of energy efficiency enquiries for the 3 year period 1 April 2005 to the 31 December 2008 for each of the local authorities. However, they are unable to produce figures for each financial year or per constituency.

The total number of enquiries recorded by NIEA for Ards Council during the period 1st April 2005 to the 31st December 2008 was 16,329. The figures for Strangford would include most of the 16,329 for Ards, part of the 16,498 figure for Castlereagh and part of the 12,509 figure for Down local authority.

### Energy Efficiency

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development why funding is not available for young couples who are struggling financially and are not on benefits, and who want to make their homes more energy efficient. (AQW 5895/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Northern Ireland Audit Office published a Value for Money study on the Warm Homes Scheme in June 2008. In this report the Audit Office highlighted a number of areas for change including the eligibility criteria. The Audit Office criticised the fact that families with children and householders aged under 60 years of age were only eligible for the Warm Homes element of the Scheme, which provides insulation and basic energy efficiency measures.

The Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee agreed that the existing eligibility criteria provided assistance for some people who were not in fuel poverty and actually excluded people who were in fuel poverty and change was needed to refocus the scheme. For this reason, from spring this year, the eligibility criteria will be changed to include families in receipt of Working Tax Credits who will now qualify for assistance with improving the heating in their homes.

Prior to a subsequent Public Accounts Committee hearing in October 2008 my Department had accepted all of the recommendations made by the Audit Office and had proposed a number of changes to the current scheme. My Department recently finished a consultation exercise on the proposed changes and over 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 also heating measures, thus improving the energy efficiency of their homes.

As these groups have been defined as those in greatest need, then this is where the funding must be targeted.

### Rathgill Estate and Breezemount Estate, Bangor

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development if money from the Small Pockets Of Deprivation will continue for Rathgill Estate and Breezemount Estate, Bangor for the next financial year. (AQW 5935/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I can confirm that the funding for areas eligible under the SPOD programme has now been extended for another year until 31 March 2010. The Rathgill Estate is eligible for funding from the SPOD programme. The Breezemount Estate is not within the most 10% deprived areas in Northern Ireland and is not therefore eligible for SPOD funding.

### Housing Executive

**Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Social Development if she is aware of the significant number of Housing Executive homes without cavity walls that have been sold to tenants; and to detail what mechanisms are in place to ensure these properties will be brought up to building regulation standard. (AQW 5936/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Housing Executive does not hold records regarding properties without cavity walls that have been sold to tenants. Upon completion of the sale, the ongoing maintenance of the property becomes the responsibility of the owner.

### Housing in Antrim Borough Council

**Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) if she is aware that the Antrim Borough Council area has one of the highest rankings for housing stress; (ii) to explain why a large number of properties remain boarded up in the Springfarm area despite increases in the housing waiting list; and (iii) to detail a time-scale when these properties will be brought up to building regulation standard and released back into the housing stock pool. (AQW 5937/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The level of housing stress, out of a total waiting list of 1051 applicants within the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Antrim District Office area, is broadly comparable to similarly sized District Office areas in Northern Ireland.

The Ministry of Defence terminated the leases of two lots of dwellings within the Springfarm Estate, Antrim which they had previously leased from the Housing Executive. The first lot was sold to a private developer who refurbished them and sold them to private sector residents. In respect of the second lot of 114 dwellings, the Housing Executive has leased 18 to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and allocated a further 13 to applicants on the social housing waiting list. The Housing Executive continues to complete the required remedial works, dependent on the availability of finance, and allocate the properties in line with demand within the area.

### Cold Weather Payments

**Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide information on the amount of cold weather payments (i) assessed; and (ii) paid, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5944/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Cold weather payments are triggered when the average temperature is, or is forecast to be, zero degrees or below over 7 consecutive days from November to March based on temperature readings supplied to my Department by the Met Office from its 5 weather stations located throughout Northern Ireland. Payments are made automatically and there is no requirement to assess individual entitlement when the qualifying conditions are met. The number and amount of cold weather payments made in the last 3 years are set out in the Table below.

TABLE 1

Year	Number of payments made	Total amount paid
2006/07	Nil	Nil
2007/08	Nil	Nil
2008/09 – to date	72,628	£1.82m

### Warm Homes Scheme

**Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Social Development how she intends to address the backlog of referrals made to eaga.plc under the (i) Warm Homes Plus; and (ii) Warmer Ways to Better Health schemes, from the Antrim Borough Council area. (AQW 5945/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I am advised by Eaga that they do not have systems that can readily provide a breakdown for the Antrim Borough Council area. However, the budget available for the Warm Homes Scheme has been fully committed for this financial year and my Department has met, and I anticipate will exceed, its Public Service Agreement target of alleviating fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy efficiency measures. I submitted a bid in the June and December monitoring round for additional resources to clear the waiting list, but unfortunately neither bid was met.

I have asked my officials to look for ways that those households, who remain on the waiting list and are most in need, will receive some assistance.

There is no backlog of applications for the Warmer Ways to Better Health scheme.

### Energy Savings for Homes

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development how many enquiries her Department has received in relation to energy savings for homes in the North Down constituency in the last financial year. (AQW 5963/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have been advised by Eaga that they do not record details of energy efficiency enquiries and can therefore only report on actual referrals recorded. The number of referrals received from the North Down constituency in the last financial year was 453.

Northern Ireland Energy Agency (NIEA) is a member of the Bryson Charitable Group who through the management and operation of the Energy Saving Trust Advice centre, offer free and impartial telephone advice to households across Northern Ireland on energy efficiency. NIEA currently hold details of the number of energy efficiency enquiries for the 3 year period 1st April 2005 to the 31st December 2008 for each of the local authorities. However, they are unable to produce figures for each financial year or per constituency.

The total number of enquiries recorded by NIEA for North Down local authority during the period 1st April 2005 to the 31st December 2008 was 19,918.

### Housing Executive

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development how many vacant Housing Executive properties there are in the Ards Borough Council area. (AQW 5988/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** There are 124 vacant properties in the Housing Executive's Newtownards District Office area, which covers the Ards Borough Council area.

### Department Owned Properties and Sites

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development what properties and sites are owned by her Department in the Strangford constituency, and what plans and time-scale there are for their development. (AQW 5990/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Northern Ireland Housing Executive owns undeveloped land holdings but does not hold the information requested by Parliamentary constituency. The table below details the undeveloped land holdings within the Newtownards, Castlereagh and Downpatrick District Office areas (which include the locations within the Strangford constituency) and the plans for their development.

District	Location	Plans
Newtownards	Holly Park Road, Killinchy	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Newtownards	Main Street, Greyabbey	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule

District	Location	Plans
Newtownards	Cypress Park 1 & 2, Donaghadee	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Newtownards	Parsonage/Rectory, Kircubbin	Retain for future use
Newtownards	Cuan Avenue, Portaferry	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Newtownards	Moat Road, Ballyhalbert	Retain for future use
Newtownards	Main Street, Carrowdore	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Newtownards	Steel Dickson Gardens, Portaferry	Retain for future use
Newtownards	Greenwood Avenue	Retain for future use
Newtownards	Beechfield Drive	Retain for future use
Newtownards	North Street, Greyabbey	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Newtownards	Lawson Park, Portavogie	Retain for future use
Newtownards	Armstrong Avenue Site 1	Retain for future use
Newtownards	Armstrong Avenue Site 2	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Newtownards	Belheim Drive Site A	Retain for future use
Newtownards	Glenbrook Rd Site 1	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Newtownards	Glenbrook Road Site 2	Programmed for transfer to Housing Association
Newtownards	Manse Road, Carrowdore	Retain for future use
Newtownards	51 Old Newtownards Road	Programmed for transfer to Housing Association
Newtownards	Dunsy Way, Comber	Programmed for transfer to Housing Association
Castlereagh	Milltown Road, Belvoir	Retain for future use
Castlereagh	Killynure Estate, Carryduff	Retain for future use
Castlereagh	Morven, Ballybeen	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Castlereagh	Sunderland/Sterling Road	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Castlereagh	Keel Way, Moneyreagh	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Castlereagh	Coleshill Gardens, Belvoir	Retain for future use
Castlereagh	Grays Park, Belvoir	Retain for future use
Castlereagh	97-107 Gilnahirk Road	Retain for future use
Castlereagh	21 Grahamsbridge Road	Retain for future use
Castlereagh	Millmount Retained Land	Retain for future use
Castlereagh	Lower Braniel Road	Programmed for transfer to Housing Association
Downpatrick	Castlewellan Road, Newcastle	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Drumhill Court, Drumaroad	Programmed for transfer to Housing Association
Downpatrick	Windmill View/Drive Site 1	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Ballyhornan Road, Downpatrick	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Ardkeel Park, Newcastle	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	The Links, Strangford	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Fountain Court	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Downpatrick	Chapel Street, Killough	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule

District	Location	Plans
Downpatrick	Pegasus Wk, Flying Horse	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	St Dymphnas Site 2	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Lislane Park, Saintfield	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Grove Park & Gardens	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Isabella Way, The Ward	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Downpatrick	Murphys Close, C'astlewellan	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule
Downpatrick	14-20 Loughside Drive	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Frederick Street Carpark	Retain for future use
Downpatrick	Windmill View/Drive Site 2	Transfer to Surplus Land Schedule

In relation to timescales for development, any sites indicated for transfer to Housing Associations will be as programmed in the new 5 year Social Housing Development Programme for 2009/10 – 2013/14 which is due to be published shortly. The Housing Executive currently undertakes to dispose of surplus sites within 3 years of being declared surplus. Sites retained for future use are subject to feasibility studies to determine their best use and an appropriate timeframe for further action.

### Housing Executive

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses have been sold to tenants by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, broken down by District Office area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5991/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The table below details the numbers of Housing Executive properties sold to tenants, broken down by District Office area, in each of the last three years.

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	Total
Belfast West	189	117	65	371
Belfast East	76	66	23	165
Belfast North	85	137	52	274
Belfast Shankill	72	78	32	182
Belfast South	60	82	36	178
Bangor	77	36	25	138
Newtownards	77	85	28	190
Castlereagh	78	81	20	179
Lisburn 1/2	113	107	42	262
Lisburn 3	82	76	25	183
Downpatrick	59	49	19	127
Banbridge	45	23	21	89
Newry	115	77	29	221
Armagh	59	50	15	124
Lurgan/Brownlow	74	55	20	149
Portadown	35	47	19	101
Dungannon	50	45	15	110
Fermanagh	86	69	43	198

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	Total
Ballymena	105	66	14	185
Antrim	113	93	23	229
Newtownabbey 1	53	70	27	150
Newtownabbey 2	60	57	19	136
Carrickfergus	47	64	22	133
Larne	30	39	18	87
Ballycastle	36	23	11	70
Ballymoney	41	37	8	86
Coleraine	80	53	18	151
L'derry 1	57	52	17	126
L'derry 2	82	73	22	177
L'derry 3	95	76	20	191
Limavady / Magherafelt	114	69	15	198
Strabane	68	70	18	156
Omagh	57	47	14	118
Cookstown	52	32	13	97
<b>Total</b>	<b>2522</b>	<b>2201</b>	<b>808</b>	<b>5531</b>

### Social Security Offices

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Social Development in the light of the economic downturn, whether she will review her decision concerning the future of Social Security office locations. (AQW 6025/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have not made any decisions concerning the future of Social Security office locations. The Strategic Business Review proposals are currently subject to ongoing public consultation. Final decisions on the review's proposals, including the number and location of Benefit Processing Centres, will not be made until consultation has been completed and the responses have been fully considered.

### Traveller's Sites

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2216/09, if the planning of any programmes or schemes for the provision of Traveller's sites must legally be within the geographical areas of Traveller families' choice or if there is flexibility to provide sites elsewhere. (AQW 6142/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The planning of any programme or scheme in relation to Traveller sites is determined by the results of a comprehensive needs assessment which ensures that an informed and strategic approach can be taken. The Housing Executive is not obliged to provide Traveller's sites in a geographically identified area (or at all) unless it considers that it is appropriate to provide such a site.

The Housing Executive has a statutory duty to provide such sites as it considers appropriate for the accommodation of caravans of members of the Traveller community. In considering whether it is appropriate to provide a Traveller site in any particular location all relevant factors must be taken into account. In drawing up a programme of schemes the Housing Executive will give consideration to greatest need and land availability in consultation with individuals, families and the wider community.

## NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

### Assembly Computer Network

**Mr Cree** asked the Assembly Commission what steps have been taken to prevent outside access to the Assembly computer network, including access by unauthorised Civil Service staff. (AQW 5659/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter):** The Assembly Commission operates 2 computer networks in Parliament Buildings. The IS Office on behalf of the Assembly Commission has implemented a number of measures to secure the primary computer network designated for use solely by Members and other authorised Assembly users. These include;

- Use of a UK government approved firewall at the perimeter of the network;
- Implementation of a secure network design by expert 3rd party installers;
- Implementation of segregation of the different user traffic across the network;
- Monitoring of traffic patterns across the network;
- Provision of a secure web based portal system for remote access, which includes a two factor authentication system, in line with public sector best practice;
- Implementation of intrusion detection systems.

The second NI Assembly owned computer network, uses wireless technology, and is regarded as less secure, being provided for use by a wider group of people using their own equipment including Members; Press; Civil Servants and other visitors to the building. All users must register with the IS Office to use the system and are then provided with access for periods ranging from 24 hrs to 3 months. There is no direct connection between this network and the primary, secure network. All computer access from this network must come through the firewall system and use the secure web based portal.

Finally the NI Civil Service have been granted permission to operate their own independent network to selected areas within Parliament Buildings for use by Ministers and other officials. This network operates to NI Civil standards and has no direct connection to the NI Assembly networks.

### Eurest Customer Satisfaction Survey

**Mr Burns** asked the Assembly Commission when Eurest will publish the results of the customer satisfaction survey recently conducted for the Blue Flax Restaurant. (AQW 5763/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** In response to the Members question, the results of the recent Customer Survey are now available on AssIST following an analysis of the results and comments by Eurest and Facilities Branch. A summarised version of the results will also be available in the Blue Flax Restaurant. I have attached a copy of the results from the survey for the Members perusal.

### Twitter Website

**Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission what use it has made of the Twitter website. (AQW 5789/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** The Northern Ireland Assembly began piloting the use of Twitter on 17th November 2008 in order to ascertain what benefits the Assembly could accrue by using the service.

As part of the Assembly's Engagement Strategy, approved by the Commission and debated in Plenary on 3 March 2009, the Assembly is seeking to increase the use of social networking websites such as Twitter to better interact and engage with the public.

To date, the pilot Assembly Twitter site has 140 followers including MLAs, journalists, and government organisations including councils, members of the public and charitable groups. It has been used to inform followers of forthcoming business, and of recent publications such as committee reports and press releases.

The Assembly Twitter site has also been used to publicise the forthcoming Assembly road shows and the 'Your Assembly, Your Say' website. It is anticipated that the Assembly will further develop its use of Twitter as a communications tool to promote its business and activities.

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 20 March 2009

## Written Answers to Questions

### OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

#### Trade Unions

**Mr McKay** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the outcome of its meeting with UNITE union and if it intends to act on any matters arising from that meeting. (AQW 5769/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness):** On 14th October 2008, as part of a series of meetings about the economic downturn, we met with a group of trade unionists comprising the following: -

- Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- NIPSA
- Ulster Teachers Union
- UNISON
- UNITE
- Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers
- UCATT - Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians

The topics discussed included the state of the local economy including the effects of the recession, the cost of living and the construction industry. The views of trade unions, along with other groups consulted by us, were taken into account as part of the Executive's consideration of measures to help deal with the economic downturn.

On 4 November 2008 and 5 February 2009 we met representatives of Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The topics discussed include future relationships with the Executive, the use of Public Private Partnerships and the economy.

To date individual unions have not requested separate meetings with us.

#### Meetings with Banks

**Mr Storey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the meetings that have been held with banks in 2009. (AQW 6134/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** We are continuing our dialogue with the banks. We met with the Ulster Bank on 3 February 2009. This was followed by a meeting with the Northern Bank on 26 February. We then met the Bank of Ireland on 3 March 2009.

We are due to meet with the First Trust/AIB in early April 2009.

## DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Orange Halls

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she has taken since entering office to help strengthen the capacity of Orange Halls in rural communities. (AQW 5811/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew):** Orange Halls Management Committees have access to support programmes managed and funded by my Department in rural areas. A range of capacity building activities has been available to all rural dwellers through the Rural Community Network (RCN); 12 local Rural Support Networks (RSNs); and NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN), funded by my Department through the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity (PBSP). I am considering continued funding for this type of development support now that the PBSP is closing.

The New Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 will also provide opportunities under the Quality of Life Measures in Axis 3. This aspect of the Rural Development Programme is being managed on behalf of the Department by Local Action Groups and Local Authority Joint Committees

### Forest Service

**Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1834/09, if Forest Service will create an inventory of all woodland areas to address both the limitations of the current approach and to deliver on the commitment in the 2002 Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy. (AQW 5818/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Forest Service has acknowledged some limitations in the current woodland inventory in relation to the estimates around new private woodland created outside forestry grant schemes and in my earlier reply (AQW 1912/09), Forest Service indicated that it will consider using other available woodland information to provide more comprehensive inventory data, allowing changes in woodland cover over the long term to be more fully captured. This process has been initiated in partnership with the NI Environment Agency (NIEA). Progress in terms of implementation of this aspect of the Biodiversity Strategy will be reported at regular intervals through the Native Woodland Group.

The Forest Service holds a significant amount of biodiversity data about the Department's woodland and, in respect of both state and private woodland, is able to make use of biodiversity information from a wide range of sources which either was not available in 2002 or not to the extent that it is available today. This includes the Ancient Woodland Inventory, data from NIEA, including surveys of Wood Pasture and Parkland, Sites of Local Nature Conservation Interest (SLNCI), Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), the NIEA Register of Historic Parks, Gardens and Demesnes, data in relation to woodland in Countryside Management Schemes, and data on the Forest Service Private Woodland Geographical Information System (GIS). These data sets provide biodiversity data to assist in managing woodland sites and deliver on the commitment under the Biodiversity Strategy.

### Wind Turbines

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail funding awards for the erection of wind turbines under the Rural Development Programme, since May 2007. (AQW 5824/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Since May 2007 no wind turbines have been funded under the Rural Development Programme.

### Agricultural and Rural Development Committee

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to (i) list the dates of, and (ii) detail the topics discussed at each meeting with the Chairman of the Agricultural and Rural Development Committee, over the last six months.[R] (AQW 5860/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My meetings with the Chairman of the Assembly Agriculture and Rural Development Committee are outlined below:-

Date	Topic(s)
7 October 2008	Meeting with the Assembly Agriculture and Rural Development Committee – Animal Health issues; Flooding; Wind Energy for Rural Business Project; Farm Nutrient Management Scheme; and Ministerial Priorities.
23 February 2009	Farm Modernisation Scheme
24 February 2009	Meeting with the Assembly Agriculture and Rural Development Committee – Farm Modernisation Scheme

### Educational Schemes

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what grants are available to farmers to provide educational schemes to schools about the business activities of farms, and where the grants can be accessed. (AQW 5892/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** There are no specific grants for farmers to provide educational schemes to schools about the business activities of farms. However funding opportunities exist for support under measure Axis 3 of the new Rural Development Programme to assist micro enterprises or persons wishing to set up a new off-farm non-agricultural business.

In the North Down area the Rural Development measures are being delivered on DARD's behalf by the Down Rural Area Partnership. The Group will support projects which are congruent with the priorities in the local rural development strategy and which have been successful in a competitive assessment. The group are currently seeking expressions of interest and can be contacted either through their chair, Mr David Kerr, telephone 07834254228 or through the Leanne McCready, Principal Project Development Officer, Ards Borough Council, 2 Church Street, Newtownards, Co. Down BT23 4AP, Telephone: 028 9182 4065 or by e-mail: [leanne.mccready@ards-council.gov.uk](mailto:leanne.mccready@ards-council.gov.uk)

### Reducing Stress in the Workplace

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development given that stress is the primary reason for absence from work, what action she intends to take to improve motivation and morale and reduce stress in the workplace. (AQW 5952/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** A number of support measures are already in place within the Department to help those staff who experience stress including welfare support and an employee assistance programme that is available 24/7 for staff and their immediate family. In addition we recently hosted a stress roadshow in conjunction with Occupational Health and NI Civil Service Sports Association. An NICS wide survey on stress is also being considered which will influence the existing NICS policy and DARD will be participating in this. We are currently researching the availability of additional interventions that should improve motivation and morale and thereby contribute to a reduction of absence levels including those attributable to stress in the workplace.

### European Union

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department has received from the European Union since 10 July 2008, in compliance with Commission Regulation (EC) No. 657/2008. (AQW 5973/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** From 10 July 2008 to 9 March 2009 my Department received £175,503.29 from the European Union for milk supplied in compliance with Commission Regulation (EC) No. 657/2008.

### EU School Milk Scheme

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the milk supplier(s) used in the EU School Milk Subsidy Scheme; and the quantity of milk, per week, that is supplied to schools. (AQW 5975/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** There are six suppliers of milk under the EU School Milk Subsidy Scheme. These are Ballyrashane Co-operative Agricultural & Dairy Society (1990) Ltd, Dale Farm Ltd, Fane Valley Co-operative Society Ltd, Grove Dairy, Joseph Gibson and Stevenson Dairies.

Based on claims submitted for the summer 2008 term, which is the most recent data available, the average quantity of milk claimed per school day was 10,799 litres, which equates to 53,995 litres per week.

### EU School Milk Scheme

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many schools take part in the European Union School Milk Scheme, broken down by Education and Library Board; and how many children in each of these schools receive such milk every day. (AQW 5977/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Based on claims submitted for the summer 2008 term, which is the most recent data available, the number of schools and children in each Education and Library Board ("ELB") participating in the EU School Milk Scheme is as follows -

ELB	Schools	Children
Belfast	102	7,472
North Eastern	203	14,859
South Eastern	103	6,368
Southern	170	11,266
Western	186	13,958
<b>Total</b>	<b>764</b>	<b>53,923</b>

### EU School Milk Scheme

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what marketing and promotional material is provided to primary-school principals in relation to the EU School Milk Scheme, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 5978/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The EU School Milk Scheme was introduced in 1977 and in the interim the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has been proactive to encourage uptake under the Scheme. This included writing on two occasions to the Chief Executive of each of the five Education and Library Boards (ELBS) and the Principals of all nursery and primary schools in the North. The letter outlined the operations of the Scheme and advised that milk can make an important contribution to a healthy balanced diet. It also encouraged those schools that did not provide drinking milk to pupils to consider doing so.

Following an amendment to the EU School Milk Scheme, which came into operation on 1 August 2008, DARD wrote to each ELB providing an Information Bulletin on the Scheme. The Information Bulletin inter alia advised that all participating schools must display a poster in the entrance hall advertising the Scheme. In addition the Information Bulletin was also placed on the DARD website.

During the year ended 31 March 2008 DARD awarded the Dairy Council for NI (DCNI) £33,150 under the DARD Regional Food Programme. This funding allowed for promotional activity primarily to encourage schools not taking school milk to participate in the EU School Milk Scheme and to communicate the benefits of taking school milk to parents of all P1 children.

This funding was complemented last year when the DCNI was awarded €284,739.77 EU funding towards an information programme which aims to reinforce the role of dairy products in our daily breakfast and to increase uptake of milk under the EU School Milk Scheme.

The programme commenced in October 2008 and it will use a mixture of radio and TV (both supported by PR activities), direct mail and school education to achieve its goal.

### Rural Development Programme

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much the administration charge will be for the delivery of the Rural Development Programme Axis 3 through local Council clusters. (AQW 5996/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Joint Council Committees will be permitted to utilise, by way of an administration budget, an amount equivalent to 20% of the funds disbursed on project grants. This means that for every £5 pounds of project spend £1 may be used towards administration. However Joint Council Committees in partnership with their LAGs may, with prudent financial management, assign a lesser percentage to administration and a greater amount to project expenditure. Therefore the final administration charge will be dependant upon the percentage drawn down in administration and the amount of grant awarded over the life of the programme.

### Countryside Management Scheme

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the criteria used to assess applications for the Countryside Management Scheme was approved by European Union authorities. (AQW 5997/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The forum that DARD is obliged to consult on selection criteria is the NIRDP Monitoring Committee. An environmental sub-group of the NIRDP Monitoring Committee was established. This group considered proposed ranking and selection criteria to ensure that the expenditure is targeted to achieve the greatest environmental benefit. The outcome of this consultation was then presented to the main Monitoring Committee of which EU officials are members. The Monitoring Committee were content with the proposals.

### Private Forestry Industry

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what co-operation exists between her Department and the private forestry industry. (AQW 5998/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My Department's Forest Service co-operates with a wide range of private forestry interests including representative bodies, businesses and individuals at a variety of different levels.

Private forestry industry stakeholders have played a key role in consultation on the development of forest policy and strategy which culminated in the publication of the Forestry Strategy, "A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth". The industry also plays an active role in response to more focused strategies.

Forest Service is in regular contact with ConFor, the main forestry organisation representing forestry contractors, wood processors and woodland owners, in relation to developing industry best practice and capacity. The scope of these contacts are wide ranging, from long term timber contracts, forest environment issues, where ConFor has a representative on the Native Woodland Group, and encouraging forest expansion under the Rural Development Programme.

Forest Service engages with private timber customers and contractors on the operational delivery of the Forestry Programme through specific contractual agreements with individual customers and contractors. Forest Service also engages with private landowners and their agents in relation to providing advice and assistance to encourage creation of new woodland under the Woodland Grant Scheme. The wider Department also engages with the private forestry industry through an Agricultural Stakeholder's Forum for Renewable Energy and the Renewable Energy Research Programme, both in relation to the development of wood biomass for an energy end-use.

### Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if sufficient financial resources are in place to meet outstanding Farm Nutrient Management Scheme claims. (AQW 5999/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I can confirm that all valid outstanding Farm Nutrient Management Scheme claims will be paid.

### Feasibility Study of the Halfpenny River

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for a timescale for the completion of the feasibility study of the Halfpenny River, designated under the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 at Knockramer Meadows area in Lurgan. (AQW 6006/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Rivers Agency is undertaking a programme of investigations of the numerous river related flooding incidents arising from the August 2008 event, including flooding from the Halfpenny River. The feasibility study is programmed for completion in late summer 2009.

### Rural Businesses

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how many rural businesses has her Department assisted in the North Antrim constituency; and (ii) how much has been invested in each business, over the past five years, (AQW 6037/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Since 2004-05 my Department has awarded non-agricultural financial assistance to 121 rural businesses in the North Antrim constituency under the auspices of the outgoing Rural Development Programme, which incorporated the Building Sustainable Prosperity, Peace II, INTERREG IIIA and LEADER + initiatives. This totals up to an overall investment of £2,822,123.96 over the period. A detailed table is available if required.

In addition, some £381,197.50 was distributed indirectly through LEADER groups. In this case it is not possible to provide a full breakdown without incurring disproportionate cost.

I am pleased to report that £100 million is available under Axis 3 of the RDP 2007-2013, and many of the measures within this Axis will target rural businesses.

### Agricultural Links

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what actions her Department has taken to develop agricultural links, including business and marketing links, between North Antrim and the corresponding area of Scotland. (AQW 6038/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Neither I nor my officials have taken any action to develop agricultural links of this nature between North Antrim and the corresponding area of Scotland.

### Departmental Accounts

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) to outline the process by which her Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits her Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail her Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6350/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:**

- (i) Outline the process by which her Department's accounts are audited
  - The NI Audit Office (NIAO) agrees an Audit Strategy with the Department. This contains key deliverables and dates.
  - The Department submits interim accounts for the 9 months to 31 December, for audit, in February.
  - In late May, the Department submits draft accounts for the 12 months to 31 March, for audit.

- There is an appropriate internal quality review process at all key stages.
  - In June the NIAO clears the accounts and agrees with the Department a report to management, identifying any emergent issues.
  - In late June the Departmental Accounting Officer signs the Final Accounts and the Comptroller and Auditor General certifies them for the NIAO.
  - The Annual Report and Accounts are laid in the Assembly, in July.
- (ii) Who audits her Department's accounts?  
The NIAO is responsible for auditing the Department's accounts.
- (iii) Detail her Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years.  
The Department's 'Annual Report & Accounts' is laid in the NI Assembly and subsequently published. Copies of these documents are available in the Assembly library.  
Copies of historical Annual Resource Accounts are also available on DARDs internet website. (Access via, [www.dardni.gov.uk](http://www.dardni.gov.uk) and follow links to Home/Strategic Corporate Information/DARD Statistics/Publications & Forms/Publications Relating to Corporate Information/Accounts).

## DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

### Festivals and Events in East Antrim

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding his Department has provided for festivals and events in East Antrim since May 2007. (AQW 4890/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell):** My Department has awarded £324, 004 for festivals and events in East Antrim since May 2007.

### Irish-Language Groups

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the Irish-language groups that have been funded by his Department; and (ii) the amount of funding provided to Irish-language groups in the Lagan Valley constituency, over the last three years. (AQW 5779/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Department does not fund individual Irish-language groups; however Irish-language groups can receive funding from Foras na Gaeilge.

Foras na Gaeilge does not hold the requested information on a constituency basis, however I have requested Foras na Gaeilge to start capturing the information in this format from 1 April 2009.

Foras na Gaeilge can however provide detailed information pertaining to specific Irish-language groups upon request.

### Ulster-Scots Projects

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many Ulster-Scots projects his Department has funded in the North Down constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5834/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** My Department through the Community Festival Fund has funded one Ulster-Scots project in the North Down Constituency over the past three years – Groomsport Eagle Wing Festival, £8,976 in the 2008/2009 year.

The Ulster-Scots Agency does not presently hold the requested information on a constituency basis. The Agency is currently reviewing its systems and procedures and as part of that I have asked the Agency to start capturing the information in this format from 1 April 2009.

The Agency can however provide detailed information pertaining to specific Ulster-Scots projects or events upon request.

### North/South Language Body

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps are being taken to obtain an explanation from the language body of the North/South bodies of why grant expenditure of £720,000 in 2000 did not have documentation. (AQW 5896/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The 2000 Accounts of the North/South Language Body were qualified.

The reason for qualification is included in the North/South Language Body Annual Report and Accounts which is in the Assembly library.

Following the qualification of the 2000 Accounts the Agencies of the North/South Language Body introduced a number of procedures and controls in relation to grant expenditures. These were approved by the Sponsor and Finance Departments and endorsed by the North/South Ministerial Council.

### Russell Gaelic Union in Downpatrick

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much grant aid his Department has given to the Russell Gaelic Union in Downpatrick, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 5930/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. SNI has provided no exchequer funding to the Russell Gaelic Union in Downpatrick (RGU) over the last ten years. However, SNI made a £60,000 lottery award to the RGU in 2001 towards the construction of a new pitch.

### Local Soccer Players

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he pledges to support and recognise the achievements of all local soccer players, whether playing for Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 5955/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** As Minister with responsibility for sport in Northern Ireland I will continue to recognise the achievements of all athletes who represent Northern Ireland at National and International sporting events.

### Irish and Ulster-Scots Funding

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made in reversing the historical disparity in funding between Irish and Ulster-Scots; and what further work he has planned to address this issue. (AQW 6062/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I am committed to addressing the disparity in funding between Irish and Ulster-Scots.

Through the implementation of the Strategy for Indigenous or Regional Minority Languages it is my intention to ensure that both languages are given equal respect and recognition and that the development of one language must be considered within the context of an equitable approach to the other.

### Traditional Arts Officer

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the analysis that took place which determined that the post of the Traditional Arts Officer will become a part time position, when currently it takes a number of officers to carry out the work. (AQW 6085/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The appointment of Arts Officers is a matter for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and is overseen by its Chief Executive and Council.

The Arts Council has advised that when assessing the weighting of a post, the volume of work associated with the case load of the particular art form area is considered. For example, the number of clients the officer will be dealing with, the number of meetings and events to be attended, as well as developmental issues.

Although there are two officers currently carrying the traditional arts portfolio while it is vacant, this is in addition to their current areas of responsibility.

The Arts Council has advised that this post has been in existence for over 20 years and has historically been a part-time one. However, it was full time when it was last filled in September 2007. This was to allow for additional responsibilities related to the planning and delivery of the traditional arts contribution to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington.

### Ten-Day Payment Policy

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures his Department has in place to ensure invoices are paid within ten-days. (AQW 6125/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** My Department has issued guidance internally and to its sponsored bodies and has requested that every effort be made to comply with the ten-day payment policy.

The Department is committed to continuously improving its performance in this area. It has already contacted active suppliers who are still paid by payable order and asked them to convert to electronic funds transfer – this will reduce the time taken for payments to reach their bank accounts.

DCAL will also migrate its transaction processing to a shared services centre (AccountNI) in April 2009 and would anticipate that new business processes based around workflow and electronic documentation would make a further significant impact on turnaround times for invoice settlement.

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what are the (i) projects; and (ii) amounts of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6156/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:**

#### DCAL CAPITAL PROJECTS – NORTH DOWN CONSTITUENCY

Ongoing and Planned Projects			
Name	Start Date	2009/10 Expenditure	2010/11 Expenditure
National Museums NI Capital Maintenance	Jan 2009	£1,653,000	£1,653,000
National Museums NI Security Systems	Oct 2008	£650,000	£0
National Museums NI Minor Operational Capital	Apr 2008	£100,000	£165,000
National Museums NI Commercial Infrastructure	To be agreed	£230,000	£125,000
Building Sport Programme Donaghadee Sailing Club	04/09/2008	£145,015	£0
Elite Facilities Programme North Down Borough Council - 50 metre pool	Subject to final business case	£195,000	£7,021,875

## North/South Language Body

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why the accounts of the North/South Language Body have not been certified since 2003; and why there has been a delay given that the accounts for other North/South bodies have been certified up to 2006. (AQW 6161/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** At the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language sectoral format Ministers directed the language body to address the backlog in laying the annual reports and accounts as a priority. The North/South Language Body annual report and accounts for the period ending 31 December 2004 was laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and both houses of the Oireachtas on 26 February 2009. The accounts for both agencies for 2005 have been consolidated and will be laid before both Parliaments when cleared by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

### Programme for Government Targets

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Education what risk assessment she has carried out on the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4886/09)

**The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane):** Cuirtear san áireamh i gClár na Rioscaí Corparáide DE iad na rioscaí ard leibhéil maidir leis an Chlár um spriocanna an rialtais agus bíonn múnaitóireacht agus athbhreithniú déanta air seo go rialta ag Bord na Roinne agus ag Coiste um Bhainistíocht Rioscaí lena chinntiú go bhfuil na rialaithe cuí agus gníomhartha bainistíochta ann leis na rioscaí a bhainistiú agus a mhaolú.

High level risks in relation to delivery of the Programme for Government targets are included in the DE Corporate Risk Register which is monitored and reviewed regularly by the Departmental Board and the DE Audit and Risk Management Committee to ensure that the appropriate controls and management actions are in place to manage and mitigate the risks. “DE fails to achieve relevant PSA targets” is recognised as a high level risk in the DE Corporate Risk Register. The DE Business Plan, which I approve, takes account of the actions my Department is taking to ensure delivery of the high level targets set out in the Programme for Government and mitigate risk. If there is a significant risk, or the likelihood of a significant risk materialising, I would be made aware of the fact.

### Primary Schools

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education how many children were enrolled in primary schools in September 2008 who were of non-compulsory school age, broken down by Education and Library Board area. (AQW 5714/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is provided in the table below.

#### PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS WHO WERE OF NON-COMPULSORY SCHOOL AGE BY ELB – 2008/09

Pupils aged under 4	ELB					Total
	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
Total	1,322	1,820	1,785	1,974	1,912	8,813

**Source:** Annual school census

**Note:**

- Figures include children in nursery, reception and Year 1 classes.
- Pupils under age taken as those aged less than 4 at 1 July 2008.

### School Pupils in Lagan Valley

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Education how many pupils in (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools in the Lagan Valley constituency have a first language other than English. (AQW 5719/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

#### PUPILS WITH ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE AT PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE LAGAN VALLEY CONSTITUENCY – 2008/09

School level	Primary	Post-Primary	Total
No. of pupils with English as an additional language	222	95	317

**Source:** Annual school census.

**Note:**

1. Primary-schools figure includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
2. A child with English as an additional language is defined as one for whom English is not their first language and who has significant difficulty with the English language and requires assistance.

### East-West Co-operation in Education

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education to detail the work she has undertaken to promote greater east-west co-operation in education in 2008/09. (AQW 5907/09)

**The Minister of Education:** I recognise the mutual benefits to our education systems of ongoing cooperation with my counterparts in the South and in Scotland, Wales and England.

In 2008/09, my Department has provided funding to the British Council to administer the east-west schools programme and the causeway programme. The east-west schools programme aims to build educational links on a tripartite basis, involving schools from across Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. The causeway programme is a youth exchange programme that was developed to strengthen and improve relationships between young people on these islands.

Officials from each of the eight British-Irish Council administrations held a very successful inaugural meeting in Cardiff in January 2009 to discuss a new thematic strand on early years policy and to take forward work on a number of topics.

Bullying is unacceptable in our classrooms and in our society. The Department cannot solve this issue alone, and therefore continues to work in close partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations through its membership and funding of the local Anti-Bullying Forum. It is also a member of the British and Irish Anti-Bullying Forum and I had the pleasure of attending its meeting in September last year.

Officials from my Department continued to work with their counterparts in the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Scottish Public Pensions Agency to co-ordinate the development of policy for the respective teachers' pension schemes here and in England, Wales and Scotland.

Last year, the Department of Education and the Education and Training Inspectorate hosted an autism stocktake event in Belfast, which included officials and inspectors from Wales, Scotland and the south of Ireland. The event provided a forum to consider autism provision across the education sector and exchange examples of good practice in a strategic context.

Bionn oifigigh ón Chigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna ag bualadh lena gcomhghleacaithe sa deisceart, i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag go rialta le heolas a chomhroinnt ar réimse ceisteanna oideachais. Bionn siad ag comhoibriú ar roinnt seimineár agus sprioc-chigearachtaí.

Officials from the Education and Training Inspectorate meet regularly with their counterparts in the south, England, Scotland and Wales to share information on a range of educational issues. They also collaborate on a variety of seminars and targeted inspections.

## Childcare and Early Years Interventions

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Education (i) what assessment has been made of the need for childcare and early years interventions; and (ii) what statutory provision exists for childcare and early years interventions, in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5927/09)

**The Minister of Education:**

- (i) The subject of Childcare incorporates a range of issues including the needs of children, the needs of parents, the affordability of childcare, regulations and standards of provision, the shared focus on care and education, and access to services. As such, aspects of childcare are the responsibility of several government departments. The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People has established a Sub-Group on Poverty which has been tasked with carrying out an assessment of the role and need for childcare. This Sub-Group will be reporting shortly to the Ministerial Sub-Committee for Children and Young People.

The evidence paper produced for the development of the Early Years Strategy has indicated the importance of early identification of any needs an individual child may be experiencing. This will be reflected in the Early Years Strategy currently being drafted.

- (ii) Taispeánann an tábla thíos suíomh na Naíonraí agus na nAonad Naoínraí, i Limistéir Athnuachana Comharsanachta, miondealaithe de réir Toghcheartair Pharlaiminte.
- (ii) The attached table shows the position of Nursery Schools and Nursery Units, in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, broken down by Parliamentary Constituency.

**NURSERY SCHOOLS BY NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL AREAS AND PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY - 2008/09**

DENI Ref	School Name	Pc	NRA
2116348	Trench Road Nursery School	Foyle	Waterside
1136106	St Martin's Nursery School	Belfast West	Upper Springfield_Whiterock
1136228	St Bernadette's Nursery School	Belfast West	Upper Springfield_Whiterock
1136349	Matt Talbot Nursery School	Belfast West	Upper Springfield_Whiterock
1136353	St Maria Goretti Nursery School	Belfast West	Upper Springfield_Whiterock
4116216	King's Road Nursery School	Belfast East	Tullycarnet
2116266	Bligh's Lane Nursery School	Foyle	Triax
2116232	Strathfoyle Nursery School	Foyle	Strathfoyle
2116333	Ballycolman Nursery School	West Tyrone	Strabane
1110001	Arellian Nursery School	Belfast South	South West Belfast
1136383	St Oliver Plunkett Nursery School	Belfast West	Outer West Belfast
2116023	The Academy Nursery School	Foyle	Outer West
2116267	Carnhill Nursery School	Foyle	Outer North
2116336	Galliagh Nursery School	Foyle	Outer North
5136342	St Malachy's Nursery School	Newry And Armagh	Newry
5136631	Drumnamoe Nursery School	Upper Bann	Lurgan
2116628	Limavady Nursery School	East Derry	Limavady
1110036	New Lodge Nursery School	Belfast North	Inner North Belfast
1116011	Victoria Nursery School	Belfast North	Inner North Belfast
1116157	Stanhope Street Nursery School	Belfast North	Inner North Belfast
1136230	Holy Family Nursery School	Belfast North	Inner North Belfast
1110002	Mcarthur Nursery School	Belfast East	Inner East Belfast
1110003	Edenderry Nursery School	Belfast North	Greater Shankill

DENI Ref	School Name	Pc	NRA
1110025	Tudor Lodge Nursery School	Belfast North	Greater Shankill
1110038	Shaftesbury Nursery School	Belfast West	Greater Shankill
1116155	Hope Nursery School	Belfast West	Greater Shankill
1136302	St Paul's Nursery School	Belfast West	Falls_Clonald
1136340	St Peter's Nursery School	Belfast West	Falls_Clonald
1136603	The Cathedral Nursery School	Belfast West	Falls_Clonald
4116176	Downpatrick Nursery School	South Down	Downpatrick
4136212	St Patrick's Convent Nursery	South Down	Downpatrick
1116159	Oldpark Nursery School	Belfast North	Crumlin_Ardoyne
1136360	Holy Cross Nursery School	Belfast North	Crumlin_Ardoyne
4136286	Good Shepherd Nursery School	Belfast West	Colin
4136368	St Luke's Nursery School	Belfast West	Colin
4136481	St Kieran's Nursery School	Belfast West	Colin
4136606	St Therese Nursery School	Belfast West	Colin
3116215	Kylemore Nursery School	East Derry	Coleraine West
3116263	Ballysally Nursery School	East Derry	Coleraine East
3116220	Ballyclare Nursery School	South Antrim	Ballyclare
5110017	Railway Street Nursery School	Newry And Armagh	Armagh
1136314	St Teresa's Nursery School	Belfast West	Andersonstown
1136316	Holy Child Nursery School	Belfast West	Andersonstown

Source: school census

**PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH NURSERY CLASSES BY NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL AREAS AND PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY - 2008/09**

DENI Ref	School Name	Pc	NRA
2036288	Good Shepherd Ps And Nursery School	Foyle	Waterside
2016124	Ashlea Ps	Foyle	Waterside
1016532	Wheatfield Ps	Belfast North	Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan
1016076	Ballysillan Ps	Belfast North	Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan
2036475	Longtower Ps	Foyle	Triax - Cityside
2016564	Fountain Ps	Foyle	Triax - Cityside
2030373	Nazareth House Ps	Foyle	Triax - Cityside
2036555	St Eugene's Ps	Foyle	Triax - Cityside
2030364	Rosemount Ps	Foyle	Triax - Cityside
2030381	Holy Child Ps	Foyle	Triax - Cityside
3010895	Rathcoole Ps	Belfast North	Rathcoole
3010827	Whitehouse Ps	Belfast North	Rathcoole
5011129	Hart Memorial Ps	Upper Bann	Portadown North West
2036472	Holy Family Ps	Foyle	Outer West Derry
2010380	Londonderry Model Ps	Foyle	Outer West Derry

DENI Ref	School Name	Pc	NRA
2016071	Greenhaw Ps	Foyle	Outer North Derry
2036142	St Brigid's Ps	Foyle	Outer North Derry
2036084	Steelstown Vol Maintained Ps	Foyle	Outer North Derry
2036574	Bunscoil Cholmcille	Foyle	Outer North Derry
2036227	St Pauls Ps, Slievemore	Foyle	Outer North Derry
5031340	St Joseph's Convent Ps	Newry And Armagh	Newry
5031158	St Patrick's Ps	Newry And Armagh	Newry
5036633	St Francis Ps	Upper Bann	Lurgan
5011127	Carrick Ps	Upper Bann	Lurgan
5010992	Lurgan Model Ps	Upper Bann	Lurgan
2032287	Termoncanice Ps	East Derry	Limavady
1036042	St Vincent De Paul Ps	Belfast North	Ligoniel
1036466	St Malachy's Ps	Belfast South	Inner South Belfast
1046641	Scoil An Droichid	Belfast South	Inner South Belfast
1010283	Grove Ps	Belfast North	Inner North Belfast
1036505	St Matthew's Ps	Belfast East	Inner East Belfast
1010269	Avoniel Ps	Belfast East	Inner East Belfast
1010267	Nettlefield Ps	Belfast South	Inner East Belfast
1010146	Euston Street Ps	Belfast East	Inner East Belfast
1016604	Harmony Ps	Belfast West	Greater Shankill
1016059	Blackmountain Ps	Belfast West	Greater Shankill
1046571	Gaelscoil Na Bhfál	Belfast West	Falls / Clonard
1036630	St Clare's Primary School	Belfast West	Falls / Clonard
2036632	Holy Trinity Ps	Fermanagh And South Tyro	Enniskillen
1056483	Cliftonville Integrated Ps	Belfast North	Crumlin / Ardoyne
4036134	St Mark's Ps	Belfast West	Colin
4036591	Our Lady Queen Of Peace Ps	Belfast West	Colin
5011190	Tullygally Ps	Upper Bann	Brownlow
5031184	St Anthony's Ps	Upper Bann	Brownlow
5016080	Drumgor Ps	Upper Bann	Brownlow
5036101	St Brendan's Ps	Upper Bann	Brownlow
4016002	Kilcooley Ps	North Down	Bangor
3013315	Ballykeel Ps	North Antrim	Ballymena
1036576	Holy Child Ps	Belfast West	Andersonstown
1046501	Bunscoil Phobal Feirste	Belfast West	Andersonstown

Source: school census

### Down High School in Downpatrick

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Education why no planning application has been submitted for the new Down High School in Downpatrick. (AQW 5929/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is ceist í pleanáil eastát na scoileanna rialaithe a bhaineann le Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt (SEELB) sa chéad dul síos.

The planning of the controlled schools' estate is a matter for the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) in the first instance.

The SEELB has identified a suitable site for Down High School. However an issue arose with respect to the protection of paupers' graves on the site which led to the SEELB engaging a firm of archaeologists to conduct some trial excavations in the area. Remains were found but have been left in situ. The Board is currently awaiting a report from the archaeologists before they formulate a way forward on the future treatment of this area.

The Board has advised that it is hoped the planning application will be lodged in a few weeks time.

### 'STOP' Group

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Education if she has received any correspondence from the 'STOP' group. (AQW 6007/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá iarratas ar chruinniú faighte agam ón ghrúpa 'STOP' le plé a dhéanamh ar an imní atá ar na tuismitheoirí seo faoi na socruithe d'Aistriú 2010.

I have received a request from the 'STOP' group for a meeting to discuss concerns these parents have about arrangements for Transfer 2010.

### School Facilities in Lagan Valley

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to upgrade school facilities in the Lagan Valley constituency in 2009. (AQW 6022/09)

**The Minister of Education:** (a) Tá scéimeanna mhionobreacha á bpleanáil faoi láthair le háiseanna sna scoileanna seo a leanas a fheabhsú sa bhlian airgeadais 2009/10 faoi réir dhóthain áiseanna bheith ar fáil.

Schemes of minor works are currently in planning to improve facilities at the following schools in the 2009/10 financial year subject to sufficient resources being available.

	Project
Friends School, Lisburn	Repairs to roof Refurbishment of toilets Boiler plant
Wallace High School, Lisburn	Air conditioning for computer suite
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn	Upgrade of heating system Refurbishment of toilets Resurfacing of playground Replacement of fencing Improvements to foyer/entrance
St Aloysius Primary School, Lisburn	Increase in height of balustrades in stairways. Safety fencing in play area Replacement window sills Refurbishment of toilets
St Colman's Primary School, Dromore	Upgrade of CCTV
Fair Hill Primary School, Kinallen	Single nursery
Largymore Primary School, Lisburn	Provision of new classrooms
Barbour Nursery, Lisburn	Indoor communal area, parents room and kitchen

	Project
Killowen Primary School, Coleraine	Nursery unit
Moira Primary School	Nursery unit
Tonagh Primary School, Lisburn	Replacement mobile for reception class
Parkview Special School, Lisburn	Provision of school leavers unit Multi use games area
Brookfield Special School, Craigavon	Multi use games area and fencing

**THE NUMBER OF SCHOOL BUILDING MINOR WORKS PROJECTS UNDERWAY ARE AS FOLLOWS:**

	Project
Friends School, Lisburn	Covered play area
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn	Provision of mat store
St Colman's Primary School, Dromore	Toilet refurbishment
Wallace High School, Lisburn	Security, health and safety and disabled access works.
Fair Hill Primary School	Classroom and Office extension
Dromore Central Primary School	Provision of double mobile

**Major Works**

Work on new school buildings for Ballinderry Primary School and Pond Park Primary School, Lisburn is currently underway and both are due to complete in 2009/10. Planning for new school buildings for St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg and Dromore Central Primary School are also currently being taken forward. Construction work on new school buildings for Brookefield Special School, Moira and Ballymacrickett Primary School, Glenavy has also been completed in recent months.

**Mobile Classrooms**

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of mobile classrooms used for teaching in each school in the Lagan Valley Constituency. (AQW 6023/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Táispeántear sa tábla thíos áit agus líon na seomraí ranga sealadacha i dToghcheantar Lagan Valley.

A table representing the location and number of temporary classrooms in the Lagan Valley Constituency is shown below.

**TEMPORARY TEACHING ROOMS IN THE LAGAN VALLEY CONSTITUENCY**

School Type	School Name	Room Type	Number
Primary	Brownlee Primary	Classroom	1
Primary	Seymour Hill Primary	Classroom	2
Primary	Tonagh Primary	Classroom	1
Primary	Dromara Primary	Classroom	1
Primary	Fort Hill Primary	Classroom	1
Primary	Derriaghy Primary	Classroom	1
Primary	Knockmore Primary	Classroom	3
Primary	Moira Primary	Classroom	1
Primary	Killowen Primary	Classroom	2
Primary	Maghaberry Primary	Classroom	1

School Type	School Name	Room Type	Number
Primary	Ballymacash Primary	Classroom	1
Primary	Riverdale Primary	Classroom	1
Primary	St Joseph's Primary (Lisburn)	Classroom	1
Primary	St Colman's Primary (Moira)	Classroom	2
Primary	Hilden Integrated Primary	Classroom	2
Primary	Oakwood Integrated Primary	Classroom	1
Post-Primary	Laurelhill Community College	Classroom	6
Post-Primary	St Patrick's High	Classroom	2
Post-Primary	Fort Hill College	Classroom	4
Post-Primary	Wallace High	Classroom	4
Primary	Dromore Central Primary	Classroom	7
Primary	Fairhill Primary	SEN Room	1
Post-Primary	Dromore High	Classroom	5

### School Building Projects in Lagan Valley

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school building projects underway in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 6024/09)

**The Minister of Education:** (a) Tá scéimeanna mhionobreacha á bpleanáil faoi láthair le háiseanna sna scoileanna seo a leanas a fheabhsú sa bhlian airgeadais 2009/10 faoi réir dhóthain áiseanna bheith ar fáil.

Schemes of minor works are currently in planning to improve facilities at the following schools in the 2009/10 financial year subject to sufficient resources being available.

	Project
Friends School, Lisburn	Repairs to roof Refurbishment of toilets Boiler plant
Wallace High School, Lisburn	Air conditioning for computer suite
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn	Upgrade of heating system Refurbishment of toilets Resurfacing of playground Replacement of fencing Improvements to foyer/entrance
St Aloysius Primary School, Lisburn	Increase in height of balustrades in stairways. Safety fencing in play area Replacement window sills Refurbishment of toilets
St Colman's Primary School, Dromore	Upgrade of CCTV
Fair Hill Primary School, Kinallen	Single nursery
Largymore Primary School, Lisburn	Provision of new classrooms
Barbour Nursery, Lisburn	Indoor communal area, parents room and kitchen
Killowen Primary School, Coleraine	Nursery unit
Moira Primary School	Nursery unit
Tonagh Primary School, Lisburn	Replacement mobile for reception class

	Project
Parkview Special School, Lisburn	Provision of school leavers unit Multi use games area
Brookfield Special School, Craigavon	Multi use games area and fencing

**THE NUMBER OF SCHOOL BUILDING MINOR WORKS PROJECTS UNDERWAY ARE AS FOLLOWS:**

	Project
Friends School, Lisburn	Covered play area
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn	Provision of mat store
St Colman's Primary School, Dromore	Toilet refurbishment
Wallace High School, Lisburn	Security, health and safety and disabled access works.
Fair Hill Primary School	Classroom and Office extension
Dromore Central Primary School	Provision of double mobile

### Major Works

Work on new school buildings for Ballinderry Primary School and Pond Park Primary School, Lisburn is currently underway and both are due to complete in 2009/10. Planning for new school buildings for St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg and Dromore Central Primary School are also currently being taken forward. Construction work on new school buildings for Brookefield Special School, Moira and Ballymacrickett Primary School, Glenavy has also been completed in recent months.

### First Language of Pupils

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 5333/09, what is her assessment of the adequacy of the provision for pupils whose first language is not English. (AQW 6029/09)

**The Minister of Education:** De réir an daonáirimh a rinneadh i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2008 bhí 6,995 dalta nuathagtha ann, a raibh an Béarla mar theanga bhreise (EAL) acu.

According to the October 2008 census there were 6,995 newcomer pupils, who have English as an additional language (EAL).

I am pleased that my Department is now ready to publish a formal policy to help schools support all newcomer pupils, regardless of their first language. This policy will ensure such pupils acquire the language of instruction to enable them to access the school curriculum and partake in every aspect of school life through building upon the capacity and skills of the school workforce as part of the overall raising standards agenda.

My Department has funded the setting up of the regional Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS) across the Education and Library Boards, to strengthen and improve support to newcomer pupils, by ensuring that a consistent level of support and specialist advice is provided to all grant-aided and special schools. In 2008/09, this service received £1,015,000 of funding.

In addition to this, my Department will continue to fund schools directly via the EAL factor of the Common Funding Formula (CFF) for each newcomer pupil who has significant language acquisition needs. In the 2008/09 financial year the EAL factor was £983 per newcomer pupil, giving a total of £5.5 million of this funding that was allocated to schools.

The key support services of the IDS that are currently available include diversity coordinators, interpreting and translating services, a multi-lingual website for teachers and newcomer parents, a toolkit for primary schools and continuous professional development for teaching staff. The future work programme will include developing toolkits for post-primary, special and nursery schools, aids for schools in initial and continuing assessment and specific training programmes aimed at increasing the capacity or skills of the teaching workforce.

An Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) survey of the support schools and the IDS are providing was completed at the end of 2008 and the report will be published soon. In addition the introduction of the 'unique pupil number' last year will allow the generation of data to assess the achievement levels of newcomer pupils.

### First Language of Pupils

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education if her Department has any plans to increase funding for schools who have pupils whose first language is not English. (AQW 6031/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Soláthraíonn mo Roinn cistiú go díreach chuig scoileanna, trí Bhéarla mar theanga breise (EAL) atá mar chuid den Fhoirmle Chómhaoinithe, a ligeann dóibh tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaltaí nua-thagtha.

My Department provides funding direct to schools, through the English as an additional language (EAL) factor of the Common Funding Formula (CFF), to allow them to support their newcomer pupils.

The funds to schools relate directly to the number of newcomer children identified in the school census. This particular method of funding is therefore flexible and responsive. The EAL factor is an additional 0.5 of the basic Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) cash value. This was £983 for each full-time newcomer pupil in 2008/09, giving a total of £5.5million. In the forthcoming 2009/10 financial year, as the EAL factor has risen to £1,010 per newcomer pupil, the total funding to be allocated will be over £6.9million.

In addition, funding is provided to Education and Library Boards, for the Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS), to enable key services to be provided to schools. In 2008/09 it received £1,015,000 and in the forthcoming 2009/10 financial year, it will receive over £1.1million.

### Composite Classes

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Education (i) how many primary schools have composite classes; (ii) where these classes are located; (iii) how many pupils are affected; and (iv) how this situation has altered over the past five years, in the North Antrim constituency. (AQW 6039/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sna táblaí thíos.

The information requested is listed in the tables below.

#### PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH COMPOSITE CLASSES IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – 2004/05

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3010466	Longstone Ps	3	60
3010572	Carrowreagh Ps	3	71
3010594	Garryduff Ps	3	62
3010722	Lisnamurrigan Ps	2	27
3010726	Dunseverick Ps	2	62
3010780	Kirkinriola Ps	3	72
3010781	Harryville Ps	4	95
3010787	Lislagan Ps	3	73
3010795	Landhead Ps	3	55
3010796	Eden Ps	3	66
3010804	Straidbilly Ps	3	61
3010818	Moorfields Ps	1	29
3010825	Carnaghts Ps	3	71
3010826	The Diamond Ps	3	81
3010834	Clough Ps	3	79
3010842	The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Ps	3	67
3010866	Ballymoney Ps	3	41

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3010873	Bushmills Ps	3	75
3010875	Ballymena Ps	2	55
3010878	Kilmoyle Ps	2	47
3010891	Fourtowns Ps	3	73
3010893	Knockahollet Ps	2	40
3013310	Broughshane Ps	3	80
3013315	Ballykeel Ps	3	75
3013322	Camphill Ps	1	22
3013325	Leaney Ps	4	111
3013333	Ballycastle Ps	4	82
3016040	Armoy Ps	3	61
3016063	Dunclug Ps	3	66
3016125	Rasharkin Ps	3	58
3016129	Carniny Ps	3	80
3016171	Ballee Ps	4	87
3016260	Cloughmills Ps	3	61
3016444	Hazelbank Ps	2	37
3016447	Balnamore Ps	4	87
3016594	Bushvalley Ps	2	60
3030438	Millquarter Ps	3	80
3030588	St Mary's Ps, Rathlin	1	3
3030621	St Mary's Ps, Portglenone	1	19
3030625	St Mary's Ps Glenravel	3	75
3030708	Glenann Ps	3	53
3030719	St Olcan's Ps	3	65
3030800	Barnish Ps	4	86
3030836	Braid Ps	2	28
3030888	St Louis' Convent Ps	2	49
3030889	St Patrick's Ps, Augher-Cloney	2	26
3030890	St Brigid's Ps, Cloughmills	4	84
3030898	St Anne's Ps, Ballymena	4	83
3033302	All Saints Ps	1	20
3033311	Glenravel Ps	4	100
3033320	St Patrick's Ps, Rasharkin	2	49
3033326	St Brigid's Ps, Ballymoney	2	20
3036072	St Joseph's Ps, Ahoghill	2	24
3036128	St Mary's Ps, Ballykeel	3	53
3036131	St Patrick's Ps, Glenariffe	3	58
3036154	St Patrick's Ps, Loughguile	3	79

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3036243	St Joseph's Ps, Dunloy	3	73
3036250	St Joseph's Ps, Ballymena	5	86
3036268	St Ciaran's Ps, Cushendun	3	77
3046653	Bunscoil An Chaistil	3	43
3066551	Braidside Integrated Ps	2	55

## PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH COMPOSITE CLASSES IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – 2005/06

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3010466	Longstone Ps	3	64
3010572	Carrowreagh Ps	3	69
3010594	Garryduff Ps	3	50
3010722	Lisnamurrican Ps	2	31
3010726	Dunseverick Ps	1	25
3010780	Kirkinriola Ps	3	72
3010781	Harryville Ps	4	91
3010787	Lislagan Ps	4	93
3010795	Landhead Ps	3	61
3010796	Eden Ps	4	83
3010804	Straidbilly Ps	4	74
3010818	Moorfields Ps	1	30
3010825	Carnaghts Ps	1	19
3010826	The Diamond Ps	3	72
3010834	Clough Primary School	3	78
3010842	The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Ps	3	52
3010866	Ballymoney Ps	3	42
3010873	Bushmills Ps	4	94
3010875	Ballymena Ps	3	87
3010878	Kilmoyle Ps	1	27
3010891	Fourtowns Ps	4	105
3010893	Knockahollet Ps	3	59
3013310	Broughshane Ps	4	118
3013315	Ballykeel Ps	2	55
3013322	Camphill Ps	1	22
3013325	Leaney Ps	4	114
3013333	Ballycastle Ps	3	72
3016040	Armoy Ps	3	59
3016063	Dunclug Ps	1	22
3016125	Rasharkin Ps	3	57

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3016129	Carniny Ps	4	105
3016171	Ballee Ps	4	84
3016260	Cloughmills Ps	4	75
3016444	Hazelbank Ps	2	45
3016447	Balnamore Ps	3	69
3016594	Bushvalley Ps	2	59
3030438	Millquarter Ps	4	102
3030588	St Mary's Ps, Rathlin	1	3
3030625	St Mary's Ps Glenravel	3	71
3030708	Glenann Ps	3	46
3030719	St Olcan's Ps	3	62
3030800	Barnish Ps	4	94
3030836	Braid Ps	2	28
3030888	St Louis' Convent Ps	2	53
3030889	St Patrick's Ps Aughercloney	2	26
3030890	St Brigid's Ps, Cloughmills	3	65
3030898	St Anne's Ps, Ballymena	3	66
3033302	All Saints Ps	2	42
3033311	Glenravel Ps	4	109
3033320	St Patrick's Ps, Rasharkin	2	46
3033326	St Brigid's Ps, Ballymoney	2	21
3036072	St Joseph's Ps, Ahoghill	2	26
3036128	St Mary's Ps, Ballykeel	3	49
3036131	St Patrick's Ps, Glenariffe	2	53
3036243	St Joseph's Ps, Loughguile	2	45
3036250	St Joseph's Ps, Dunloy	4	77
3036268	St Ciaran's Ps, Cushendun	3	69
3046653	Bunscoil An Chaistil	3	42
3066551	Braidside Integrated Ps	2	54

## PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH COMPOSITE CLASSES IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – 2006/07

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3010466	Longstone Ps	3	56
3010572	Carrowreagh Ps	2	37
3010594	Garryduff Ps	3	63
3010726	Dunseverick Ps	2	51
3010780	Kirkinriola Ps	3	59
3010781	Harryville Ps	4	103

<b>DENI Ref</b>	<b>School Name</b>	<b>No. of Composite Classes</b>	<b>No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes</b>
3010787	Lislagan Ps	3	74
3010795	Landhead Ps	3	55
3010796	Eden Ps	3	72
3010804	Straidbilly Ps	3	58
3010825	Carnaghts Ps	1	21
3010826	The Diamond Ps	4	93
3010834	Clough Primary School	5	124
3010842	The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Ps	3	62
3010866	Ballymoney Ps	3	42
3010873	Bushmills Ps	4	94
3010878	Kilmoyle Ps	2	48
3010891	Fourtowns Ps	4	101
3010893	Knockahollet Ps	3	64
3013310	Broughshane Ps	3	84
3013315	Ballykeel Ps	3	64
3013322	Camphill Ps	1	23
3013325	Leaney Ps	4	108
3013333	Ballycastle Ps	3	53
3016040	Armoy Ps	3	57
3016063	Dunclug Ps	2	47
3016125	Rasharkin Ps	3	62
3016129	Carniny Ps	5	135
3016171	Ballee Ps	3	58
3016260	Cloughmills Ps	3	63
3016440	Portglenone Ps	1	29
3016444	Hazelbank Ps	2	49
3016447	Balnamore Ps	3	70
3030438	Millquarter Ps	3	80
3030588	St Mary's Ps, Rathlin	1	4
3030625	St Mary's Ps Glenravel	3	74
3030708	Glenann Ps	3	48
3030719	St Olcan's Ps	3	55
3030800	Barnish Ps	4	89
3030836	Braid Ps	2	24
3030889	St Patrick's Ps Aughtercloney	2	26
3030890	St Brigid's Ps, Cloughmills	4	83
3030898	St Anne's Ps, Ballymena	3	62
3033302	All Saints Ps	1	19
3033311	Glenravel Ps	3	73

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3033326	St Brigid's Ps, Ballymoney	2	20
3036072	St Joseph's Ps, Ahoghill	2	17
3036131	St Patrick's Ps, Glenariffe	2	45
3036243	St Joseph's Ps, Dunloy	2	45
3036250	St Joseph's Ps, Ballymena	4	73
3036268	St Ciaran's Ps, Cushendun	3	69
3046653	Bunscoil An Chaistil	4	71
3066551	Braidside Integrated Ps	2	56

## PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH COMPOSITE CLASSES IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – 2007/08

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3010466	Longstone Ps	3	57
3010572	Carrowreagh Ps	3	59
3010594	Garryduff Ps	3	55
3010780	Kirkinriola Ps	4	89
3010781	Harryville Ps	5	103
3010787	Lislagan Ps	4	94
3010795	Landhead Ps	3	48
3010796	Eden Ps	3	81
3010804	Straidbilly Ps	4	81
3010825	Carnaghts Ps	1	18
3010826	The Diamond Ps	4	98
3010834	Clough Primary School	1	30
3010842	The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Ps	4	73
3010866	Ballymoney Ps	2	15
3010873	Bushmills Ps	3	64
3010878	Kilmoyle Ps	2	49
3010891	Fourtowns Ps	4	100
3010893	Knockahollet Ps	3	66
3013310	Broughshane Ps	3	81
3013315	Ballykeel Ps	2	43
3013322	Camphill Ps	1	25
3013325	Leaney Ps	4	108
3016040	Armoy Ps	3	50
3016063	Dunclug Ps	2	50
3016125	Rasharkin Ps	3	60
3016129	Carniny Ps	3	79
3016171	Ballee Ps	3	73

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3016260	Cloughmills Ps	2	35
3016440	Portglenone Ps	1	30
3016444	Hazelbank Ps	2	43
3016447	Balnamore Ps	4	89
3030438	Millquarter Ps	3	76
3030588	St Mary's Ps, Rathlin	1	4
3030625	St Mary's Ps Glenravel	3	64
3030708	Glenann Ps	3	52
3030719	St Olcan's Ps	3	53
3030800	Barnish Ps	4	91
3030836	Braid Ps	2	23
3030889	St Patrick's Ps Aughercloney	2	5
3030890	St Brigid's Ps, Cloughmills	3	70
3030898	St Anne's Ps, Ballymena	3	65
3033311	Glenravel Ps	2	53
3033320	St Patrick's Ps, Rasharkin	1	29
3033326	St Brigid's Ps, Ballymoney	2	20
3036072	St Joseph's Ps, Ahoghill	2	18
3036131	St Patrick's Ps, Glenariffe	2	56
3036243	St Joseph's Ps, Dunloy	1	24
3036268	St Ciaran's Ps, Cushendun	3	59
3036666	St Colmcille's Ps	2	54
3036679	St Brigid's Ps, Ballymena	3	84
3046653	Bunscoil An Chaistil	3	57
3053333	Ballycastle Ps	4	85
3066551	Braidside Integrated Ps	1	30

## PRIMARY SCHOOLS WITH COMPOSITE CLASSES IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – 2008/09

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3010466	Longstone Ps	3	58
3010572	Carrowreagh Ps	3	68
3010594	Garryduff Ps	3	59
3010780	Kirkinriola Ps	4	99
3010781	Harryville Ps	3	57
3010787	Lislagan Ps	3	79
3010795	Landhead Ps	3	46
3010796	Eden Ps	3	69
3010804	Straidbilly Ps	2	37

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3010825	Carnaghts Ps	1	20
3010826	The Diamond Ps	4	99
3010834	Clough Primary School	2	53
3010842	The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Ps	4	72
3010866	Ballymoney Ps	3	29
3010873	Bushmills Ps	3	66
3010875	Ballymena Ps	1	30
3010878	Kilmoyle Ps	4	76
3010891	Fourtowns Ps	4	98
3010893	Knockahollet Ps	2	51
3013310	Broughshane Ps	3	74
3013315	Ballykeel Ps	2	47
3013322	Camphill Ps	1	27
3013325	Leaney Ps	3	83
3016040	Armoy Ps	3	53
3016063	Dunclug Ps	4	84
3016125	Rasharkin Ps	3	61
3016129	Carniny Ps	3	64
3016171	Ballee Ps	3	61
3016260	Cloughmills Ps	2	27
3016440	Portglenone Ps	1	32
3016444	Hazelbank Ps	2	45
3016447	Balnamore Ps	4	93
3030438	Millquarter Ps	1	24
3030588	St Mary's Ps, Rathlin	1	4
3030625	St Mary's Ps Glenravel	3	63
3030708	Glenann Ps	3	45
3030719	St Olcan's Ps	3	49
3030800	Barnish Ps	4	85
3030836	Braid Ps	2	18
3030890	St Brigid's Ps, Cloughmills	4	74
3030898	St Anne's Ps, Ballymena	3	62
3033311	Glenravel Ps	1	19
3033326	St Brigid's Ps, Ballymoney	2	25
3036131	St Patrick's Ps, Glenariffe	1	30
3036243	St Joseph's Ps, Dunloy	3	69
3036268	St Ciaran's Ps, Cushendun	2	43
3036666	St Colmcille's Ps	1	25
3036679	St Brigid's Ps, Ballymena	2	53

DENI Ref	School Name	No. of Composite Classes	No. of Pupils Enrolled in Composite Classes
3036683	St Paul's Ps, Ahoghill	3	27
3046653	Bunscoil An Chaistil	3	65
3053333	Ballycastle Integrated Ps	2	39
3066551	Braidside Integrated Ps	1	31

**Source:** school census in the north of Ireland

**Note:**

1. Composite classes are those classes where children from two curriculum year groups are taught together. In some instances however, children from different year groups may be taught as a single year group. An example of this might be where a child from abroad is 'held back' a year, so that they can access the curriculum at a level appropriate to their previous educational experience. Some instances of these are included in the figures provided.
2. Figures relate to children in year 1 – 7 classes and include children in mainstream classes and special units within schools.

## Children with Learning Disabilities

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Education what is the selection criteria used by Boards of Governors to admit children with learning disabilities. (AQW 6044/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is ceist a bhaineann leis an scoil féin í an cheist faoi na mionchritéir iontrála a úsáideann Bord Gobharnóirí na scoile ach ní bheadh tagairt ar leith do pháistí a bhfuil deacrachtaí foghlama acu sna critéir iontrála, dairíre .

The exact nature of admissions criteria used by school Boards of Governors is a matter for each individual school, but admissions criteria would not in practice make specific reference to children with learning difficulties. Admissions criteria tend to be of the type described in the recently published Transfer 2010 guidance, and if children with learning difficulties require support on admission that can be catered for. If learning difficulties require a statement of special educational needs, such children would be placed on the basis of the content of that statement.

## Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Education what are her Department's plans to provide a transfer system to post-primary schools for children who have statements. (AQW 6045/09)

**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, nach mbeidh athrú ar bith ar na nósanna imeachta a bhíonn á bhfeidhmiú lasmuigh de nósanna imeachta oscailte rollaithe do pháistí a bhfuil ráiteas ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais acu, lena chinntiú go bhfaighidh na páistí sin an áit scoile is oiriúnaí dóibh.

The Transfer 2010 guidance published on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly explains that the procedures that operate outside of the open enrolment procedures for children in receipt of a statement of special educational needs will continue unchanged, in order to ensure that such children are provided with the most appropriate school placement.

## Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Education to list the schools which have indicated that they will conduct their own entrance examinations in 2010. (AQW 6055/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is iad Lumen Christi College agus Slemish College an dá scoil atá i ndiaidh a chur in iúl dom go mbeidh scrúduithe iontrála d'Aistriú 2010 acu.

The two schools that have indicated to me that they intend offering entrance examinations for Transfer 2010 are Lumen Christi College and Slemish College.

## Primary Schools in Upper Bann

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the total amount of finance allocated as ring-fenced in each of the last three years to primary schools in Upper Bann; and (ii) the amount underspent and returned to her Department. (AQW 6064/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Sonraítear sa tábla thíos na méideanna imfhálaithe a dáileadh chuig bunscoileanna na Banna Uachtar i ngach bliain le trí bliana anuas agus na méideanna nár caitheadh ag gach deireadh bliana.

The table below provides details of the ring-fenced amounts which have been allocated to Upper Bann primary schools during each of the last three years and the amounts unspent at each year end. 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 therefore returned to my Department.

£000'S

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
Ring-fenced Funding	1,419	1,835	1,559
Amount under spent /(overspent)		352	93

SELB delegates earmarked funds directly to schools and monitors expenditure on the basis of educational initiative outcomes. On that basis over the 3 years concerned the only reported underspends from Upper Bann primary schools were in relation to the extended schools initiative, the details of which are included on the table.

## Our Lady's & St Mochua's Primary School, Derrynoose

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to assist the provision of an additional classroom at Our Lady's & St Mochua's Primary School, Derrynoose, given the rise in admissions and the long term accommodation difficulties with the current Primary 5 class. (AQW 6091/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Cé nach bhfuair an Roinn iarratas foirmiúil go fóill le haghaidh seomra ranga breise don scoil, tá oifigigh ar an eolas gur ardaíodh ceisteanna faoin chóiríocht atá ann anois.

Although my Department has not to date received formal application for an additional classroom for the school, officials are aware that issues have been raised about the current accommodation. The department is in contact with the CCMS on the position. If an application is submitted to the department it will be considered in line with the criteria set down for such applications.

## Departmental Staff

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Education where the health of an employee in her Department is at threat, would she give priority to that person for a move to more suitable employment. (AQW 6096/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Nuair a chuirtear in iúl go bhfuil bagairt ann do shláinte aon fhostaithe, moltar don fhostaí dul i dteagmháil leis an Oifigeach Leasa le rátáil Leasa a fháil, rátáil a mbaintear úsáid aisti le tosaíocht ar an Lárliosta Aistrithe a thabhairt do bhaill foirne atá ag iarraidh aistriú chuig fostaíocht níos oiriúnaí.

Where it has been made known that the health of an employee is at threat, the employee is advised to contact the Welfare Officer for consideration of a Welfare rating which is used to prioritise staff on the Central Transfer List who wish to secure a move to more suitable employment.

## Middletown Centre for Autism

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education, (i) how many children with autism have been admitted to the Middletown Centre for Autism; (ii) what the total cost of staff salaries and benefits is; and (iii) how many staff will be employed when the recently advertised additional seven posts are filled. (AQW 6104/09)

**The Minister of Education:** In answer to part (i) of your question, the Middletown Centre for Autism is not yet in a position to accept referrals for its assessment services. The two key services to be provided by the Centre that involve the referral of children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders are the Educational Assessment Service and the Learning Support Service. It is planned that the Educational Assessment Service will be modelled later this year on an outreach basis and that the Learning Support Service will come on stream in 2010 following the completion of the building programme.

The Centre currently offers the training and advisory service and the autism research and information service. The Centre has trained 624 professionals, north and south, since December 2007. Also, the Centre has commenced research in relation to data collection and the Centre has recently completed a review of literature on diet and its impact on autism.

In answer to part (ii) of your question, I have been informed by the Chief Executive Officer of the Centre that the total cost of staff salaries for the first year of operation April 2007- March 2008 was £219,284 and that the total cost for this current year April 2008 - February 2009 is £419,829. The costs of the Centre are shared on a north/south basis.

Ar deireadh, chuir an Príomhoifigeach Feidhmiúcháin in iúl dom fosta go mbeidh 24 ball foirne, idir lánaimseartha agus pháirtaimseartha, fostaite ag an ionad nuair a bheidh na seacht bpost atá á bhfógrú faoi láthair líonta.

Finally, the Chief Executive Officer has also informed me that following successful recruitment of the seven posts currently advertised there will be 24 full and part-time members of staff employed by the Centre.

### Middletown Centre for Autism

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education what activities have taken place at the Middletown Centre for Autism since 2005 and to detail the number of children on the Autism Spectrum that have directly benefited from these activities. (AQW 6105/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá Ionad Uathachais Choillidh Chanannáin i mbun feidhme ó lú Aibreán 2007. Tá na seirbhísí atá a mholadh á dtabhairt isteach ar bhonn céimnitheach le bheith ag teacht le cur i gcrích an chláir um athchóiriú an fhoirgnimh.

The Middletown Centre for Autism has been in operation since 1st April 2007. The services proposed for the Centre are being phased in order to coincide with the completion of the building refurbishment programme. The Centre already offers the training and advisory service and the autism research and information service. The educational assessment service will be modelled during 2009.

The learning support service will be the fourth service to be offered, as it requires completion of the new building which is expected to be completed in 2010.

The following information has been supplied by the Chief Executive Officer of the Centre.

The Centre has already trained 624 professionals, north and south, over a total of 29 training courses to date in the following areas: ASD and co-morbidities; ASD and Mental Health; Sensory processing difficulties in ASD; Meeting the sensorimotor skills of children with ASD within the curriculum framework; PEP-3; TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (first training in England, Scotland, Wales or the north or south of Ireland); and TEACCH Practice and Research. All of the training has been evaluated and feedback from the trainees has been very positive.

The education professionals trained will use the knowledge and skills gained from the training in their daily work with children and young people with autism, throughout Ireland.

Research has already commenced in relation to data collection and the Centre has recently completed a review of literature on diet and its impact on autism and will shortly publish their findings in the form of an information leaflet.

The Centre is also developing its capacity as an information resource and is already offering significant reference resources in the form of books and access to academic journals for professionals.

### Distribution of Department Publications

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education if she will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6110/09)

**The Minister of Education:**

Maidir le dáileadh cháipéisí chomhairliúcháin agus foilsiúcháin eile, Leanann mo Roinn na bealaí dáilte comhaontaithe chuig ionadaithe polaitíochta agus teagmhálaithe parlaiminteacha mar atá sonraithe sa Treoir OFMDFM ar Dháileadh Fhoilsiúcháin agus Cáipéisí Chomhairliúcháin na Roinne mar chuid den nós imeachta a bhaineann le ‘Páipéir curtha i láthair’ sa Tionól.

In distributing consultation documents and other publications, my Department follows the agreed distribution channels to political representatives and parliamentary contacts, specified in the OFMDFM Guidance on the Distribution of Departmental Publications and Consultation Documents by the “Papers Presented” procedure in the Assembly. In addition, the Department informs MLAs by letter of consultations undertaken by the Department and where they can obtain copies, including electronically, from the Department’s website.

### Composite Classes

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education which primary schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area operate composite classes. (AQW 6115/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is contained in the table below.

**Primary schools with composite classes in the North Eastern Education and Library Board 2008/09**

**School Name**

- Tildarg Ps
- Longstone Ps
- Carnalbanagh Ps
- Larne And Inver Ps
- Duneane Ps
- Straid Ps
- Carrowreagh Ps
- Garryduff Ps
- Parkgate Ps
- Creavery Ps
- Doagh Ps
- Mullaghdubh Ps
- Kirkinriola Ps
- Harryville Ps
- Lislagan Ps
- Landhead Ps
- Eden Ps
- Ballynure Ps
- Straidbilly Ps
- Glynn Ps
- Ballycarry Ps
- Mallusk Ps
- Greenisland Ps
- Groggan Ps

- Carnaghts Ps
- The Diamond Ps
- Whitehouse Ps
- Clough Primary School
- The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Ps
- Portrush Ps
- Upper Ballyboley Ps
- Crumlin Ps
- Sunnylands Ps
- Abbots Cross Ps
- Ballymoney Ps
- Moyle Ps
- BushmiLls Ps
- Ballymena Ps
- Kilmoyle Ps
- Straidhavern Ps
- King's Park Ps
- Fourtowns Ps
- Ballytober Ps
- Knockahollet Ps
- Rathcoole Ps
- Culcrow Ps
- Cullycapple Ps
- Hezlett Ps
- Tobermore Ps
- Ampertaine Ps
- Portstewart Ps
- Drumard Ps
- Magherafelt Controlled Ps
- Kilrea Ps
- Culnady Ps
- Castleroe Ps
- Bellaghy Ps
- Maghera Ps
- Broughshane Ps
- Ballykeel Ps
- Camphill Ps
- Leaney Ps
- Ballycraigy Ps
- Toreagh Ps
- Kilross Ps
- Castledawson Ps
- Silverstream Ps
- Armoy Ps
- Gorran Ps
- Parkhall Ps

- Dunclogh Ps
- Garvagh Ps
- Rasharkin Ps
- Carniny Ps
- Ballee Ps
- Woodlawn Ps
- Ashgrove Ps
- Earlview Ps
- Ballysally Ps
- Cloughmills Ps
- Cairncastle Ps
- Knockloughrim Ps
- Portglenone Ps
- Hazelbank Ps
- Balnamore Ps
- Creggan Ps
- Millquarter Ps
- St Patrick's Ps, Portrush
- St Mary's Ps, Ballycastle
- St Mary's Ps, Glenravel
- Glenann Ps
- Carlane Ps
- St Olcan's Ps
- Barnish Ps
- Moneynick Ps
- Braid Ps
- St Macnisi's Ps, Tannaghmore
- St Brigid's Ps, Cloughmills
- St Anne's Ps, Corkey
- Seaview Ps
- St Anthony's Ps, Larne
- Altayeskey Ps
- St Brigid's Ps, Tirkane
- Ballyhackett Ps
- St Trea's Ps
- Knocknagin Ps
- St Columba's Ps, Garvaghy
- St Columba's Ps (Cullion)
- St Colum's Ps, Portstewart
- Ballynease Ps
- St Columba's Ps, Magherafelt
- St Eoghan's Ps, Magherafelt
- St Mary's Ps, Draperstown
- St Malachy's Ps, Coleraine
- Tir-Na-Nog Ps
- Glenravel Ps

- St John's Ps, Coleraine
- St Mary's Ps (Glenview)
- St Joseph's Ps, Antrim
- Lourdes Ps
- St Brigid's Ps, Magherafelt
- St Patrick's Ps, Glenariffe
- St Columba's Ps, Coleraine
- St Joseph's Ps, Dunloy
- St Ciaran's Ps, Cushendun
- St Nicholas' Ps, Carrickfergus
- St Colmcille's Ps, Ballymena
- St Brigid's Ps, Ballymena
- St Paul's Ps, Ahoghill
- Kilcoan Ps
- Desertmartin Ps
- Bunscoil An Chastil
- Gaelscoil Na Speirini
- Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach
- Carnlough Controlled Integrated Ps
- Glengormley Integrated Ps
- Carhill Integrated Ps
- Ballycastle Integrated Ps
- Rathenraw Integrated Ps
- Roundtower Integrated Ps
- Braidside Integrated Ps
- Maine Integrated Ps

**Source:** school census in the north of Ireland.

**Note:**

3. Composite classes are those classes where children from at least two curriculum year groups are taught together. In some instances however, children from different year groups may be taught as a single year group. An example of this might be where a child from abroad is 'held back' a year, so that they can access the curriculum at a level appropriate to their previous educational experience. Some instances of these are included in the figures provided.
4. Figures relate to children in year 1 – 7 classes and exclude children in special units within schools.

### Academic Selection

**Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what options will be available to children attending (i) St John's Primary School, Glen; (ii) St Mary's Primary School, Barr; (iii) St Colman's Primary School, Sheeptown; (iv) Ballyholland Primary School, Ballyholland; (v) St Patrick's Primary School, Mayobridge; (vi) Carrick Primary School, Burren; and (vii) Clontifleece Primary School, Warrenpoint, who, prior to transferring to second level education choose not to participate in any form of academic selection. (AQW 6120/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Déantar cur síos ar na roghanna atá ar fáil do thuismitheoirí agus do pháistí ó scoil ar bith liostaithe thuas, nó ó bhunscoil ar bith eile, laistigh den leabhrán asitrithe atá foilsithe ar bhonn bliaintiúil ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus a shonraíonn na critéir iontrála a bhaineann le gach iarbhunscoil. Sonraítear ann fosta eolas ábhartha eile a chuidíonn le thuismitheoirí agus le páistí socruithe eolasacha a dhéanamh nuair atá roghanna um aistriú iarbhunscoile le nochtadh ar fhoirm aistrithe acu.

The options that are available to parents and children associated with any of the schools listed, or any other primary school, are described within a post-primary transfer booklet which is published annually by each Education and Library Board detailing the admissions criteria that apply to all post-primary schools and other relevant information that helps parents and children make informed decisions on the expressing of preferences for post-primary transfer on a transfer form. The post-primary transfer booklets contain information about all types of school regardless of whether they practise academic selection or not.

### Academic Selection

**Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what options will be available to children attending (i) St Mary's Primary School, Rathfriland; (ii) St Patrick's Primary School, Drumgreenagh; (iii) St Patrick's Primary School, Ballymaghery; (iv) St Paul's Primary School, Cabra; (v) St Colman's Primary School, Annaclone; (vi) St Mary's Primary School, Dechomet; and (vii) St Michael's Primary School, Finnis, who, prior to transferring to second level education, choose not to participate in any form of academic selection. (AQW 6121/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Déantar cur síos ar na roghanna atá ar fáil do thuismitheoirí agus do pháistí ó scoil ar bith liostaithe thuas, nó ó bhunscoil ar bith eile, laistigh den leabhrán asitrithe atá foilsithe ar bhonn bliaintiúil ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus a shonraíonn na critéir iontrála a bhaineann le gach iarbhunscoil. Sonraítear ann fosta eolas ábhartha eile a chuidíonn le thuismitheoirí agus le páistí socrúithe eolasacha a dhéanamh nuair atá roghanna um aistriú iarbhunscoile le nochtheadh ar fhoirm aistrithe acu.

The options that are available to parents and children associated with any of the schools listed, or any other primary school, are described within a post-primary transfer booklet which is published annually by each Education and Library Board detailing the admissions criteria that apply to all post-primary schools and other relevant information that helps parents and children make informed decisions on the expressing of preferences for post-primary transfer on a transfer form. The post-primary transfer booklets contain information about all types of school regardless of whether they practise academic selection or not.

### Academic Selection

**Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what options will be available to children attending (i) Holy Cross Primary School, Atticall; (ii) Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School, Grange; (iii) Killowen Primary School, Killowen; (iv) St Bronagh's Primary School, Rostrevor; (v) St Dallan's Primary School, Warrenpoint; and (vi) St Ronan's Primary School, Newry; who, prior to transferring to second level education, choose not to participate in any form of academic selection. (AQW 6122/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Déantar cur síos ar na roghanna atá ar fáil do thuismitheoirí agus do pháistí ó scoil ar bith liostaithe thuas, nó ó bhunscoil ar bith eile, laistigh den leabhrán asitrithe atá foilsithe ar bhonn bliaintiúil ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus a shonraíonn na critéir iontrála a bhaineann le gach iarbhunscoil. Sonraítear ann fosta eolas ábhartha eile a chuidíonn le thuismitheoirí agus le páistí socrúithe eolasacha a dhéanamh nuair atá roghanna um aistriú iarbhunscoile le nochtheadh ar fhoirm aistrithe acu.

The options that are available to parents and children associated with any of the schools listed, or any other primary school, are described within a post-primary transfer booklet which is published annually by each Education and Library Board detailing the admissions criteria that apply to all post-primary schools and other relevant information that helps parents and children make informed decisions on the expressing of preferences for post-primary transfer on a transfer form. The post-primary transfer booklets contain information about all types of school regardless of whether they practise academic selection or not.

### Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education how many complaints she has received from parents about post-primary transfer arrangements in the last year (i) in total; (ii) broken down by constituency; and (iii) broken down by council area (AQW 6138/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá méid suntasach chomhfhreagrais faighte agam i rith na tréimhse seo maidir le hábhar an aistrithe iarbhunscoile, agus in alán cásanna, bíonn thuismitheoirí agus eile ar lorg léiriúcháin faoi shonruithe um fhorbairt mo mholtaí ar an aistriú iarbhunscoile agus le déanaí ar fhoilsiú na Treoir um Aistriú 2010.

I have received a considerable volume of correspondence on the subject of post-primary transfer during this period, and in many instances parents and others are seeking clarification on points of details about the development of my proposals for post-primary transfer and in more recent times the publishing of Transfer 2010 guidance. Correspondence of this nature is not routinely classified by any category and may take the form of enquiries, supportive or negative comments, or personal views on a way forward. On occasions parental correspondence includes a request for me to bring certainty to bear on arrangements for Transfer 2010. It is a subjective judgement as to whether correspondence of this nature should be described as letters of complaint, and in an increasing number of instances parental correspondence takes the form of an e-mail which contains no address details, hence precluding any analysis by constituency or council area. The information requested is therefore not readily available.

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Education what are the (i) projects; and (ii) amounts of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6155/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Seo a leanas an t-eolas ar mhórtionscadail caipitil atá faoifa i dtoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh:

Information on approved major capital projects in the North Down constituency is as follows:

School	Project Details	Estimated Cost £M	Estimated Start Date
Bangor Grammar School	New school on new site	17.8	2009/10
St Columbanus College, Bangor	New school on existing site	14.8	2009/10
Priory College, Holywood	New school on new site	11.7	2010/11
Towerview P.S. Bangor	New school on existing site	3.0	Complete 2009/10

A number of minor works schemes are also in planning to improve facilities at the following schools in 2009/10, subject to sufficient resources being available. These are detailed in the table below. At this stage, it is not possible to anticipate minor works projects for the 2010/11 financial year.

School	Project Details	Estimated Cost £000'S
St Patrick's Primary School Holywood	Toilet refurbishment Replacement windows	160
Sullivan Upper Holywood	Air conditioning system to selected rooms Fire Risk Assessment Refurbishment of music department	5 117 n/k
Trinity Nursery School Bangor	Rewire	60
Clandeboyne Primary School Bangor	New boiler plant	120
Crawfordsburn Primary School	Toilet refurbishment Improvements to entrance way	100 55
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	2 or 3 classroom extension with shared play/ resource space	300
Millisle Primary School	Disabled Access and enlarge Special Educational Needs room	80
Rathmore Primary School Bangor	Improvements to toilet facilities	100
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School	Works to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act	100
Glenlola Collegiate School, Bangor	Extension to lunch accommodation in basement	50

### Donaghadee High School

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to explain why the South Eastern Education and Library Board has failed to contact staff at Donaghadee High School about their future, since the school is due to close in August 2009. (AQW 6186/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá tugtha le fios dom ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Dheiscirt go bhfuil baint ghníomhach dhíreach acu leis an fhoireann múinteoireachta agus leis an fhoireann nach múinteoirí iad atá fostaithe i Donaghadee High School agus leis na ceardchumainn maidir le dúnadh na scoile ar 31 Lúnasa 2009.

I am advised by the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the Board is actively involved directly with teaching and non teaching staff employed in Donaghadee High School and their Trade Unions concerning the closure of the school on 31 August 2009.

The Board also advises that a number of consultation meetings have already taken place with staff and Trade Unions. Individual one-to-one meetings with staff are being scheduled.

### Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education if grammar schools will continue to have the same status following the introduction of the proposed transfer arrangements in 2010. (AQW 6192/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tugtar sainmhiniú dleathach do scoil ghramadaí ar bhonn nach bhfuil nasctha leis an phróiseas iontrála atá aici.

A grammar school is legally defined as a grammar school in a manner unconnected with the nature of its admissions process. The existing definition is contained in the interpretation section of the Education and Libraries Order (NI), 1986 and is as follows: “‘grammar school’ means a secondary school which—

- (a) immediately before the coming into operation of Article 128 of the 1989 Order was a school in which fees were charged or could have been charged in respect of pupils admitted to the school, or a school which replaces such a school or schools; or (b) is established after the coming into operation of that Article and is designated by the Department as a grammar school.

### Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education if the Free School Meals (FSME) criterion is the over-riding admissions criterion for transfer of children from primary to post-primary schools. (AQW 6194/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Minítear san Aistriú 2010 go molar le bheith ina chéad chritéar é an critéar um Theidlíocht do Bhéilí Saora Scoile (FSME) agus é in úsáid ag gach iarbhunscoil nuair atá a n-iontrálacha á socrú acu.

The Transfer 2010 guidance explains that a Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME) criterion is recommended as the first criterion to be used by all post-primary schools in determining admissions. The guidance also lists a number of other recommended criteria, but in no particular order.

### Post-Primary Transfer: Legal Advice

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education whether she has discretion to publish the legal advice she received from the Departmental solicitor in relation to the introduction of guidelines for post-primary transfer. (AQO 2295/09)

**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.

### Educational Strategies

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education what communication she has had with her colleagues in Scotland and Wales about exchanging educational strategies. (AQO 2297/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Bhuaile mé leis an Aire in Albain ar 12 Nollaig 2007 le plé a dhéanamh ar chúrsaí amhail oiliúint do mhúinteoirí, dul i ngleic leis an tearghnóthachtáil agus Gaelscolaíocht anseo agus in Albain.

I met with my Scottish counterpart on 12 December 2007 to discuss and share our thinking on matters such as teacher education, tackling educational underachievement and Irish/Gaelic-medium education.

I attended British Irish Council meetings on 16 July 2007 and 14 February 2008 along with counterparts from England, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey. The meeting in Dublin in February focused on issues of drug misuse, with a focus on children and families; early years policy; child protection; and child poverty – all issues for which our education system has a role to play.

In September 2008, I attended a meeting of the British and Irish Anti-Bullying Forum, of which my Department is a member.

### Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

**Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Education what is the status of the Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion which commenced in April 2006. (AQO 2298/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Cuireadh na moltaí a bhí mar thoradh ar an Athbhreithniú faoi bhráid an Choiste Fheidhmiúcháin i mí Iúil 2008 le meabhrán feidhmiúcháin breise i mí na Samhna ar lorg comhaontaithe leis na moltaí a eisiúint le haghaidh comhairliúcháin phoiblí.

The policy proposals which have emerged from the Review were referred to the Executive in July 2008 with a further Executive memo in November seeking agreement to issue for public consultation.

To date the Executive has not discussed the policy proposals and agreement has not been given to proceed to consultation.

Subject to Executive agreement it is our intention to proceed to public consultation without delay.

The policy proposals relate to the most vulnerable in our society and the public consultation on the policy proposals are much anticipated by educationalists, voluntary sector, parents, teachers, trade union side and all those involved in the extensive pre-consultation stage.

I have recently issued my Executive colleagues a copy of the Equality Impact Assessment on the review's proposals. This clearly identifies the various barriers to learning which children in our society face and many of which are not mutually exclusive.

There are now nearly 60,000 (18.6%) of our children and young people with a special educational need and 13,219 (4.1%) with a statement. The policy proposals maintain a very clear focus on the needs of these children within an inclusive conceptual framework which complements and supports the efforts to address special educational need. The concept of additional need recognises the interface between barriers to learning which already exist for many of our children and the applicability of a range of strategies to the continuum of need.

The focus of the proposed policy is on early identification and early intervention to provide the necessary support through capacity building in educational settings and multi disciplinary partnerships with the health and social services sectors.

My policy proposals aim to improve both the outcomes from education and the life chances of those children.

I would implore my Executive colleagues to urgently agree to the issue of these proposals for full consultation to allow everyone involved to contribute to the shaping of the final policy.

### Post-Primary Transfer: Legal Advice

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Education on what dates she received legal advice from her departmental solicitor in relation to the introduction of guidelines for post-primary transfer. (AQO 2299/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Glacann gach Roinn comhairle dlí (agus cineálacha eile comhairle riachtanaí) maidir le roinnt mórbheart, agus d'admhaigh mé gur ghlac mé sa chás seo.

All Departments take legal advice (and other necessary types of advice) on many major actions, and I have acknowledged that I have done so in this instance. Legal advice obtained by Government Departments is privileged, and I consider details of communication with legal advisers to be as privileged as the resulting legal advice.

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. That 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: Independent Arrangements

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the impact on children of schools opting for independent transfer arrangements based on examination. (AQO 2300/09)

**The Minister of Education:** 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.

The impact on children whose parents choose to seek admission for them to these schools will be the stress and anxiety associated with preparing for multiple tests, possibly of differing types, and awaiting the results thereafter. They run the risk of further uncertainty and anxiety if challenges arise in respect of any aspect of the testing process.

Ní gá go dtarlóidh sé seo ar chor ar bith agus is féidir é a sheachaint má chloíonn gach scoil leis na moltaí atá sa treoir ar Aistriú 2010.

This is entirely unnecessary and can be avoided if all schools adhere to the recommendations contained in the Transfer 2010 guidance.

### Science, Mathematics and English: NI Performance

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of Northern Ireland's performance in Science, Mathematics and English as reported in the Programme for International Student Assessment report published in December 2007, and how these compare with the non-selective systems in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 2301/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Léiríonn torthaí 2006 an Chláir um Mheasúnú ar Mhic Léinn Idirnáisiúnta (PISA) sa léitheoireacht mar shampla, go bhfuil scór de 495 againn agus is ionann an scór seo agus meánfheidhmíocht ag leibhéal OECD.

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 an average performance at OECD level. Compare this to the performance of the south where children are not subjected to the trauma of selection and generally attend all-ability schools - its performance in reading is significantly higher than ours and significantly higher than the OECD average.

Turning to England and Scotland, I can report that their PISA outcomes place them in a similar bracket to us. Like us and like the south, they are significantly above the OECD average performance in science. In reading and in mathematics both Scotland and England perform at the OECD average, as do we.

It is clear to me that we should be aspiring to be far better than simply average – there should be no reason why our performance cannot match that of the south in reading; or indeed of countries like Finland which outperform us in all three areas: reading, mathematics and science.

Academic selection does not improve our chances of achieving better performance – in my view, quite the reverse. An indicator of that is the fact that, of all OECD countries, we have one of the greatest gaps in achievement between our highest and lowest performing students and that is nothing to be proud of.

### Post-Primary Transfer: Entry Criteria

**Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the legal requirements faced by schools opting to use examinations as part of their entry criteria. (AQO 2302/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Soláthraíonn an Treoir Aistrithe 2010, a bhí foilsithe de bhun mo raitis ar 2 Feabhar 2009 chuig an Tionól, líosta léiriúcháin, nach bhfuil uileghabhálach, de na riachtanais a bheidh ag scoileanna a roghnaíonn gan glacadh leis na moltaí sa treoir.

The Transfer 2010 guidance published on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly provides an illustrative, though not exhaustive, list of requirements faced by schools that choose not to adhere to the recommendations contained within the guidance.

Some of these requirements have a legislative basis, such as the requirement to make reasonable adjustments for children defined as disabled under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Other requirements set out in the guidance, such as the special provisions and special circumstances procedures, do not have their origins set out explicitly in legislation, but can equally be described as requirements in that breakaway schools would be expected by parents to operate robust procedures of an equivalent standard to those in operation under the outgoing arrangements involving a Department of Education approved Transfer Test. Failure to do so may lead to legal challenges by parents.

Schools intending to offer entrance tests will in my view increasingly become embroiled in a legal minefield.

### Post-Primary Transfer: Breakaway Entrance Tests

**Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Education if the absence of regulation means that children will sit a number of different breakaway entrance tests. (AQO 2303/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl gá ar bith ann do pháiste ar bith le teist iontrála a dhéanamh.

There is no need for any child to sit an entrance test. The Transfer 2010 guidance published on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement to the Assembly provides for a system of post-primary transfer which does not require any form of testing and addresses the inequalities associated with academic selection.

Schools intending to offer entrance tests will in my view increasingly become embroiled in a legal minefield.

### Post-Primary Transfer: CCEA Test

**Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Education to detail why she has withdrawn the test that CCEA had been developing. (AQO 2304/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is é an t-aon bhealach amháin gur féidir teist a chur ar fáil ar bhonn freagrach, ná creatlach reachtach a chur léi a mhíníonn cén dóigh a n-úsáidfear í.

The only way a test could responsibly be made available is if there is a legislative framework defining its use. The successful operation of an admission-determining test requires not just a test, but a legal framework providing for which schools can and cannot use it, stating exactly how it should and should not be used and also stating that it alone should be used.

The test was a contingency for an agreement. My proposals featured a test in the interests of compromise and to give grammar schools three years to adjust to a long-term future without any selection and without any test. The reason that will not now happen is because others were not capable of equivalent concessions.

### Portadown College: New School

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Education for an update on plans to build a new school at Portadown College. (AQO 2305/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an measúnú ar an bhreithmheas athcheartaithe eacnamaíochta ar Portadown College críochnaithe ag an Roinn.

The Department has completed its assessment of a revised economic appraisal for Portadown College which was submitted by the Southern Education and Library Board. The Board has agreed to undertake further work on the option to complete a replacement school on the playing fields on the lower part of the existing school site.

## DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

### Disablement Advisory Service

**Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance is available from the Disablement Advisory Service for young people with special needs leaving school who are unable to access mainstream vocational training provision. (AQW 5753/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** The Disablement Advisory Service purchases residential vocational training places at Parkanaur College for people with disabilities including young people. The Disablement Advisory Service also provides a range of pre-vocational and vocational programmes to assist people with disabilities find and keep employment. These programmes include: Workable (NI), Access to Work, New Deal for Disabled People, the Job Introduction Scheme, the Condition Management Programme and the Work Preparation Programme.

### Filling Employment Gaps

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department is working with local companies to fill employment gaps created by migrant workers leaving Northern Ireland to work elsewhere. (AQW 5802/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** While there is currently no statistical evidence to suggest that migrant workers are leaving Northern Ireland to work elsewhere, my Department has access to a greater pool of labour supply already skilled for jobs or willing to retrain and improve their skills level to take up vacant positions due to the economic downturn. Through Programmes such as Steps to Work, Apprenticeships NI and Bridge to Employment we will continue to work closely with employers from all Sectors to meet their particular skills needs.

### Placement Programmes

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what placement programmes and other incentives are available for companies to encourage them to hire recent graduates. (AQW 5803/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** My Department has a number of programmes available to further develop the skills and knowledge of graduates to encourage companies to recruit them.

The Software Professional Course is a 35 week graduate conversion course designed to give non-IT graduates the skills to work in the ICT industry in Northern Ireland. Participants receive a training allowance of £120 per week from the Department whilst in training and they have the opportunity to earn up to £500 in bonuses depending on performance.

The Futures Programme is another example of the Department's commitment to helping employers to recruit graduates. The Programme, supported jointly by the Department and Invest NI, is designed to develop expertise in the associated areas within the fund servicing sector. It gives full training for the Investment Administration

Qualification and provides an opportunity for placement with a top financial services institution in the UK or Europe, with the view to permanent employment on completion of the course.

To date, over 30 graduates have completed training under the Futures Programme and have participated in a number of workshops aimed at developing their personal effectiveness, teamwork and interview skills, the aim of which is to ensure that the participants make an immediate impact on their future placement company.

Bridge to Employment programmes are also available to companies as a method of recruiting graduates and indeed have been used in this way previously. Bespoke training courses are developed by Bridge to Employment staff in conjunction with the participating company and include, where possible, periods of in-company training to provide participants with on-the-job experience.

In addition, my Department is currently in early stage discussions with Invest NI on the possibility of developing a graduate placement scheme which would allow companies to offer placements to new graduates. This new concept would allow the companies, and the wider economy, to avoid seeing potential employees leave the local job market to seek work elsewhere (for example in London) at a time when both global economic conditions and recruitment freezes in multinational firms are impacting on their planned recruitment. Invest NI would provide funding for the wage costs of the placements whilst the Department for Employment and Learning would fund a series of off the job training covering technical training and softer skills such as project management and team working.

It is hoped that a pilot of this programme focusing initially on the IT sector will be operational by this summer.

Furthermore, the Employment Service provides assistance to individuals who are unemployed or economically inactive to move towards and into work. An Employer Subsidy may be available to employers recruiting individuals who have been unemployed or economically inactive for 13 weeks or more, including graduates.

### **Jobs and Benefits Offices**

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what level of cooperation there is between companies, training organisations and jobs and benefits offices. (AQW 5804/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** There is a strong level of co-operation between Jobs and Benefits Office staff, employers and training organisations through provision of on-site redundancy clinics, Job Fairs, Advice and Opportunities Forums and partnerships with employers and Steps to Work lead contractors.

### **Apprentices**

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what schemes are available for companies and businesses to help with employing trainees and apprentices. (AQW 5806/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** My Department is committed to helping companies employ trainees and apprentices and runs a number of initiatives to this end.

The Bridge to Employment programme is a pre-employment training programme which aims to provide customised training courses to equip the unemployed, particularly the long-term unemployed, as well as those returning to the labour market, with the skills necessary to compete for new employment opportunities on an equal basis with others.

The programme also assists those employers wishing to expand their workforce to recruit suitable skilled unemployed people, thereby minimising the effects on other employers.

Participants on Bridge to Employment training courses learn the skills necessary to meet the recruitment profile for employment opportunities provided by inward investment companies and expanding indigenous companies. Bespoke training courses are developed by Bridge staff in conjunction with the participating company. The training courses are delivered mainly by the Further Education colleges, other public or private sector training providers or, in exceptional cases, by the employer. Where possible, periods of in-company training are included to provide participants with on-the-job experience.

Training places leading to job opportunities are advertised in the press, the Jobs & Benefits offices, including the JobcentreOnline website, and through the network of Community Groups. Participating companies are

expected to offer a job interview to all trainees who successfully complete the training course. There is a target of 80% employment however, actual outcomes consistently exceed this.

ApprenticeshipsNI aims to provide participants of all ages with the opportunity to get Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications. This provision offers a diverse range of training and the opportunity to gain nationally recognised qualifications, giving participants the necessary skills needed for their chosen career. There are currently over 100 types of apprenticeships available.

Employers contribute by providing quality training in the workplace, by supporting the apprentice's learning and by paying a wage that is relative to the industry rate for the job. The Department pays full costs of 'directed training' for the duration of an apprenticeship. Depending on the complexity, occupational area and level of the apprenticeship framework being followed, the maximum funding can range between £2,600 and £10,800.

In addition, employer incentives are available ranging between £500 and £1,500. Once again this is relative to the type of apprenticeship being undertaken and is payable on the achievement of a full apprenticeship framework.

By offering Apprenticeships, employers will find it easier to recruit and retain the right people for their business. The Department plans to include a suitable entry on an Invest NI website ([www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk](http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk)) to raise the profile amongst businesses of this provision.

### Local Training Needs

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what level of co-operation exists between those companies who have certain training requirements and those with responsibility for identifying local training needs and providing this training. (AQW 5807/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In Northern Ireland there are six Workforce Development Forums tasked to identify local skills training needs to propose practical solutions to their skills needs. These are employer-led structures and they invite membership from employers and other stakeholder organizations involved in local economic development.

The Workforce Development Forums are holding a series of local workshops/publicity events to ensure that employers are given every opportunity to communicate their labour force skills needs and to work with them to develop solutions at a local level.

In addition, my Department is currently developing a programme to support the work of the Forums through the provision of a team of training advisers who can further strengthen the links between the demand and supply sides of the training system. This will complement the existing employer engagement mechanisms established in each of the 6 Further Education Colleges.

### Apprenticeship Schemes

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if there are any plans to bring back the old style apprenticeship schemes or Action for Community Employment (ACE) schemes. (AQW 5808/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** My Department has currently no plans to go back to classroom-based apprenticeships. Employers are central to the success of an apprenticeship programme. An individual cannot be trained as an apprentice unless he/she is employed and the employer commits to training under an Apprenticeship Framework, as designed by industry for industry. Consequently, the employer is central to the whole programme. A good employer trains and develops his/her workforce because it makes good business sense in terms of increased productivity, staff motivation and retention and thereby improving business competitiveness.

My Department currently has no plans to re-introduce the Action for Community Employment programme. Steps to Work is the Department's main adult return to work programme and can provide participants with a wide range of work experience placements together with opportunities for subsidised employment. I am satisfied that it is sufficiently flexible to adapt to the current economic conditions and any emerging needs. It also provides greater assistance to those seeking work than that available in any other part of the UK.

## Training Requirements of Companies

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans there are to ensure educational establishments provide for the training requirements of companies. (AQW 5809/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Further Education Colleges offer local companies a wide range of training provision and practical support to promote innovation, assist with product design development, and manufacture, and generally to improve companies' overall performance.

Through Workforce Development Forums (WDF), FE Colleges are better able to identify local skills training needs, and to respond accordingly.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offer a range of Foundation Degrees, integrating theoretical learning with practical application.

In order to further improve skills levels in local industry, my Department is also considering:

- strengthening WDFs, to improve further College responsiveness;
- expanding Foundation Degrees through more flexible delivery arrangements;
- introducing flexible funding arrangements to support short cycle, modular or unitary courses, and
- promoting the 'Connected' programme, which enables companies to avail of the opportunities for knowledge transfer, training and up-skilling within local universities and colleges.

## Ten-Day Payment Target

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much of the total amount due to suppliers was paid within the ten-day payment target, in the last year. (AQW 5821/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In January the percentage of invoices paid by DEL within the ten-day target was 73.5%, rising to 78.5% in February.

Following the Finance Minister's announcement in November, the Department has been committed to making payments to suppliers within the target of 10 working days. The Department complies with the Prompt Payment Code and provides information on prompt payment performance in the annual resource accounts. For the 2007/08 financial year, 99% of suppliers were paid within 30 days. Data relating to payments to suppliers within 10 days is not available for the last year.

## Apprentices

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) which firms have agreed to foster apprentices; (ii) how many apprentices have been placed with fostering firms; and (iii) how many apprentices have been made redundant, broken down by vocational category. (AQW 5845/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** At present, there are no redundant apprentices in fostering. However, there are 6 applications being considered by Harland and Wolff, Magadeline and Barrington Daughter and Son. Granier Packaging and Dunbia are also considering being involved as foster employers. Other companies such as Michelin have had to withdraw their interest due to other business considerations.

Apprentices who wish to continue with their training have the opportunity to join either Training for Success or the Steps to Work programmes. Others have found alternative employment with some opting for Further Education. The Careers Service has provided advice to a number of redundant apprentices in order to explore the options available.

Management Information collected by the Department in relation to apprentices who have left training provision is included in a broader "early leaver" destination category. Consequently, the Department cannot say categorically whether these apprentices have left due to redundancy. Nevertheless, from 1st January 2008 until 21st January 2009, the following numbers of apprentices have been recorded as being "early leavers" in the following sectors:

Childcare	177
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Agriculture	9
Engineering	187
Manufacturing Technologies	16
Transport Operations and Maintenance	68
Building and Construction	374
ICT Practitioners	4
ICT for Users	5
Retailing and Wholesaling	138
Service Enterprise	50
Hospitality and Catering	162
Sport Leisure Recreation	18
Publishing/Information Science	6
Administration	51
Business Management	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,265</b>

I would emphasise that not all of these apprentices will have left apprenticeship provision due to redundancy, as people leave both training and employment for a wide variety of reasons. This is especially true in sectors with a historically transient workforce such as Hospitality and Catering or Retail.

In order to gain greater clarity on the current status of apprentices who have been made redundant from the three priority skills areas, i.e. construction, engineering, and motor vehicle, from 1st April 2008 to 4th February 2009, the Department carried out a monitoring exercise with its ApprenticeshipsNI Training Suppliers.

A total of 303 apprentices have been made redundant from these three priority skill areas since 1st April 2008. This total can be broken down as follows:

Construction	Engineering	Motor Vehicle
205	78	20

### University of Ulster

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the impact on higher education provision in Belfast when the planned expansion of the University of Ulster takes place at the York Street campus. (AQW 5846/09)

**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.

I am advised by the University, as it intends to redistribute its existing student places between its Jordanstown and Belfast campuses and that the planned expansion does not appear to have any immediate impact on higher education provision in the Greater Belfast area.

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 but they will continue to respond to, and meet the needs of, the market, as appropriate.

It is imperative that the economic appraisal for the proposed capital investment in the Belfast campus meets 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. Any expansion of this scale will also probably require Equality and Environmental Impact Assessments.

However, if and when approval is given, it may take up to eight years before the proposed expansion of the Belfast campus is complete.

### Apprentices

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many apprentices have been made redundant by employers in the East Belfast constituency. (AQW 5847/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Department carried out a recent monitoring exercise, in conjunction with Training Suppliers, in respect of apprentices who have been made redundant across the three priority skills areas most affected by the economic downturn. This exercise has shown that a total of 303 apprentices have been made redundant across these areas as follows:

Construction	Engineering	Motor Vehicle
205	78	20

We are not in a position to break these figures down by constituency. However, 38 of these apprentices are from the Belfast area.

### Apprentices

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many apprentices have been made redundant in the North Down constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 5888/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Management Information collected by the Department in relation to apprentices who have left the apprenticeship provision is included in a broader “early leaver” destination category. Consequently, the Department cannot say categorically whether these apprentices have left due to redundancy. The following table indicates the number of apprentices that have been recorded as “early leavers” in the North Down area for the periods 20th March 2006 until 20th March 2007, 21st March 2007 until 20th March 2008 and 21st March 2008 until 11th March 2009.

We are not in a position to break these numbers down by constituency. However, we have endeavoured, in the table below, to provide you with the information broken down by the town of residence of apprentices that closely represent your constituency.

Town	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total
Newtownards	18	24	31	73
Bangor	17	17	26	60
Donaghadee	3	1	5	9
Holywood	4	0	3	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>149</b>

I would emphasise that not all of these apprentices will have left apprenticeship provision due to redundancy, as people leave training for a wide variety of reasons.

Many of the apprentices listed above will have found alternative employment, or will have availed of the Department’s contingency arrangements for redundant apprentices for those affected in the key skills areas of Motor Vehicle, Engineering and Construction. Others may have returned to an alternative training provision or mainstream Further Education.

### Third-Level Education College Staff

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when arrears arising out of national pay agreements, are expected to be paid to third-level education college staff. (AQW 5890/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The implementation of the National Joint Council pay increase for non-teaching staff in further education (FE) colleges is subject to an approval process, in accordance with the public sector pay policy adopted by the Northern Ireland Executive.

The terms under which the pay agreement will be applied, and its associated business case, are currently being prepared by FE college employers, in consultation with my Department. That work should be completed within the next two weeks. When finalised, the proposals will be submitted to the Department of Finance & Personnel (DFP) for approval. The increase will be paid once that approval process has been completed.

### Non-Teaching Staff in Further Education Colleges

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) to confirm when the NJC pay increase for non-teaching staff in further education colleges for 2008 was agreed; and (ii) when this will be paid. (AQW 5924/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The application of a National Joint Council (NJC) pay increase of 2.45%, to non teaching staff in further education (FE) colleges was agreed in October 2008. The increase is effective from April 2008. In addition, following an arbitration award at national level in March 2009, an additional 0.3% on top of the 2.45% is expected to be paid to non teaching staff from April 2008. The implementation of the pay increase is subject to an approval process in accordance with the public sector pay policy adopted by the Executive. The terms under which the pay agreement will be applied, and its associated business case, are currently being prepared by FE college employers in consultation with my Department. That work should be completed within the next two weeks. When finalised, the proposals will be submitted to the Department of Finance & Personnel (DFP) for approval. The increase will be paid once that approval process has been completed.

### Reducing Stress in the Workplace

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning given that stress is the primary reason for absence from work, what action he intends to take to improve motivation and morale and reduce stress in the workplace. (AQW 5951/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Department recognises that such illnesses whether work related or not, can lead to long-term absence from work. The Department actively promotes stress management through interventions including;

- referral to the welfare support service,
- 24-hour access to the employee assistance programme (Carecall),
- timely referral to the Occupational Health Service (OHS) for advice,
- staff participation in physical health and lifestyle assessments which are provided by OHS,
- information leaflets and publications on mental health issues, including stress, which are accessible on the OHS website,
- a two-day Healthworks course which enables staff to assess their health and review their lifestyle,
- Healthworks roadshows and short ad hoc stress sessions,
- provision of ongoing training to help employees cope with changing roles and technology,
- provision of special leave and flexible working arrangements,
- promotion of the sources of help and support available including the NICS carers' website and the Civil Service benevolent fund and
- the equal opportunities officer and a network of harassment contact advisers.

The Department has arranged for the benevolent fund to deliver personal finance seminars to staff during March 2009.

The Department is also considering undertaking a stress survey. It is hoped that the results of the survey will help inform and influence policy direction and target 'hotspots'.

### Apprentices

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many apprentices have been made redundant since September 2008; and their current employment status, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 5957/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Management Information collected by the Department in relation to apprentices who have left the Apprenticeship provision is included in a broader "early leaver" destination category. Consequently, the Department cannot say categorically whether these apprentices have left due to redundancy. Nevertheless, from 1st January 2008 until 21st January 2009, the following numbers of apprentices have been recorded as being "early leavers" in the following sectors:

Childcare	177
Agriculture	9
Engineering	187
Manufacturing Technologies	16
Transport Operations and Maintenance	68
Building and Construction	374
ICT Practitioners	4
ICT for Users	5
Retailing and Wholesaling	138
Service Enterprise	50
Hospitality and Catering	162
Sport Leisure Recreation	18
Publishing/Information Science	6
Administration	51
Business Management	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,265</b>

I would emphasise that not all of these apprentices will have left apprenticeship provision due to redundancy, as people leave both training and employment for a wide variety of reasons.

Furthermore, many of the apprentices listed above will have found alternative employment, or will have availed of the Department's contingency arrangements for redundant apprentices for those affected in the key skills areas of Motor Vehicle, Engineering and Construction. Others may have returned to an alternative training provision or mainstream Further Education.

In order to gain greater clarity on the current status of apprentices who have been made redundant from the three priority skills areas, the Department carried out a monitoring exercise with its ApprenticeshipsNI Training Suppliers. This revealed that 303 apprentices have been made redundant from these areas from 1st April 2008 to 4th February 2009. This total can be broken down as follows:

Construction	Engineering	Motor Vehicle
205	78	20

The current status of these apprentices is as follows;

- 157 have been referred to the Careers Service for advice on further training;
- 51 are continuing their training under Training for Success;

- 26 are continuing their training under Steps to Work;
- 43 have found alternative employment, including continuing apprenticeship training or returned to their previous employer;
- 16 have entered Further Education; and
- the remaining 10 apprentices have not maintained contact with the training supplier.

The Department is not in a position to break these numbers down by constituency. However, the following table provides a breakdown by City/Town based on the address of each apprentice.

Antrim	2	Cookstown	10	Limavady	8
Armagh	8	Craigavon	2	Lisburn	4
Ballinamallard	1	Crumlin	2	Londonderry	14
Ballycastle	7	Derrylin	1	Magherafelt	15
Ballymena	19	Donemana	1	Newcastle	1
Ballymoney	10	Downpatrick	7	Newry	12
Ballynahinch	7	Dromore	1	Newtownabbey	7
Banbridge	5	Drumquin	1	Newtownards	5
Bangor	1	Dungannon	26	Newtownstewart	1
Belcoo	2	ROI	1	Omagh	19
Belfast	38	Enniskillen	2	Portadown	5
Bellaghy	1	Hillsborough	1	Portrush	2
Bushmills	1	Keady	2	Randalstown	1
Carrickfergus	8	Kesh	1	Roslea	1
Castlederg	2	Kilkeel	1	Strabane	15
Coleraine	17	Larne	4	Trillick	1

I trust that you will find this information satisfactory.

### Teacher Training at Queens University

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what the religious breakdown is of people in teacher training at Queens University. (AQW 6027/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The religious breakdown of people in teaching training courses at Queen's University, Belfast in 2007/08 is detailed in the table below.

Religion	Number
Protestant	80
Catholic	75
Other	10
Not known/available	20
Total	185

**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.
- (3) Religious affiliation is not a mandatory question and has a high non-response rate.

## University E-mail Accounts

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what regulations are in place to govern the use of university e-mail accounts by staff for party political purposes. (AQW 6058/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Both universities in Northern Ireland are independent institutions and are responsible for formulating their own regulations governing the use of their e-mail accounts and systems. They have policies in place and they are subject to regular review. The policies do not refer specifically to the use of e-mail accounts for party political purposes.

At Queen's University users are permitted to make use of the e-mail system for personal reasons but this must be for occasional use only. Any regular and excessive use may give rise to review and possible disciplinary action.

At the University of Ulster staff e-mail accounts may be used for any academic, administrative, or social and recreational use which is in furtherance of the aims and mission statement of the University. Use of e-mail accounts which does not comply with this is not authorised.

## University Students

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many, and what percentage of the total number of students went to university from each constituency in each of the last three years. (AQW 6060/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The total number of NI domiciled students enrolled at a UK Higher Education Institution from each parliamentary constituency in each of the last three years is detailed in the table below:

Parliamentary Constituency	2005/06		2006/07		2007/08	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Belfast East	2,895	4.4	2,645	4.2	2,630	4.2
Belfast North	2,265	3.4	2,115	3.4	2,200	3.5
Belfast South	5,155	7.8	4,580	7.3	4,215	6.8
Belfast West	2,465	3.8	2,280	3.6	2,365	3.8
East Antrim	3,055	4.6	2,875	4.6	2,835	4.6
East Londonderry	3,275	5	3,235	5.1	3,175	5.1
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	3,735	5.7	3,595	5.7	3,430	5.5
Foyle	4,990	7.6	4,645	7.4	4,550	7.3
Lagan Valley	4,075	6.2	3,850	6.1	3,845	6.2
Mid Ulster	3,385	5.2	3,290	5.2	3,390	5.4
Newry And Armagh	4,150	6.3	3,820	6.1	3,735	6
North Antrim	3,685	5.6	3,625	5.7	3,460	5.6
North Down	3,450	5.2	3,330	5.3	3,065	4.9
South Antrim	3,700	5.6	3,475	5.5	3,430	5.5
South Down	4,275	6.5	4,075	6.5	3,885	6.2
Strangford	3,345	5.1	3,260	5.2	3,205	5.1
Upper Bann	3,630	5.5	3,510	5.6	3,490	5.6
West Tyrone	3,660	5.6	3,450	5.5	3,355	5.4
Not Known	550	0.8	1,370	2.2	2,030	3.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>65,730</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>63,015</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>62,300</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

**Notes:** (1) Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5 and therefore may not sum to totals.

(2) The latest available data are for 2007/08.

### Jobs and Benefits Office in Limavady

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what staff vacancies there are in his Limavady office. (AQW 6237/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** There are 3 staff vacancies in Limavady Jobs and Benefits Office.

### Stranmillis/Queen's: Proposed Merger

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he will advise Stranmillis University College and Queen's University, Belfast about the likelihood of the proposed merger date of August 2009 being achieved. (AQO 2306/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I am aware that both Queen's University and Stranmillis University College have a target date of August 2009 to complete the proposed merger between the two institutions. I have made it clear to senior management at both Queen's and Stranmillis that there are key steps that must be taken prior to any merger being approved. Those steps include the endorsement of legislation by this Assembly. The timetable for any proposed merger will be determined by the completion of all those steps, rather than any desired deadline.

### Apprentices

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on his plans to assist apprentices being paid off due to the current economic difficulties. (AQO 2313/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** As previously outlined, 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 these sectors were the most affected by the economic downturn.

The Department is also examining data on other sectors, and as I said recently, it will introduce similar arrangements if that is shown to be necessary.

On a recent monitoring exercise, the Department established that from the range of options available to redundant apprentices a number of these have been taken up. This includes alternative employment, Steps to Work and the Pre-apprenticeship programme. We have also determined that whilst some employers are currently considering fostering applications, most of those being re-employed have attained alternative employment and others have offered work placements through the Steps to Work option.

### Research Assessment Exercise: Queen's University's Performance

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment his Department has made of the performance of Queen's University, Belfast in the Research Assessment Exercise. (AQO 2315/09)

**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. Queen's University Belfast (QUB) submitted almost 800 staff to the Research Assessment Exercise 2008 and every area had research assessed as world-leading. Queen's has 11 subject areas ranked within the top 10 in the UK and 24 in the top 20. An examination of the league tables produced by the Times Higher Education on 18 December 2008 records Queen's as 39th out of the 132 universities; this represents a jump of 6 places from 2001 when it was ranked 45th.

### Student Loans

**Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on work undertaken to increase the threshold for repayment of student loans from £15,000 to £18,000. (AQO 2316/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which collects payments on income contingent repayment loans on Government's behalf, has made it clear to all Devolved Administrations that it cannot operate a UK-wide collection system with different repayment thresholds. My Department could not, therefore, increase the repayment threshold unless the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills in England and the other Devolved Administrations were to do similar.

However, in light of the concerns which have been raised by the Committee for Employment and Learning, local Assembly Members and the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), I have recently written to my Ministerial colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales about this issue, and I have given a commitment to update the Committee when I receive their responses.

### Tuition Fees

**Lord Browne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he would request the Student Loans Company to change the system for paying university fees to include an option for students to pay by monthly direct debit. (AQO 2317/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Since the introduction of variable deferred tuition fees in September 2006, eligible students have three options for paying their tuition fees. They can:

- (i) Defer payment of their fees by applying for a tuition fee loan up to a maximum of £3,145 (in the current academic year). The tuition fee loan only has to be repaid once the student leaves their course and is earning over £15,000. The amount repaid is 9% of the borrower's gross income above that threshold; or
- (ii) Pay the full tuition fee upfront direct to the Higher Education Institution (HEI); or
- (iii) Take out a fee loan for part of the tuition fees, and pay the rest direct to the HEI.

If a student chooses to pay all or part of the tuition fees upfront, the student pays the fees directly to the HEI. The Student Loans Company has no involvement in this transaction.

In addition to the option of paying the full tuition fees up front, the Department is aware that Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster both offer students the option of paying their fees through a direct debit scheme.

As the option is already available through the University, I will not be requesting the Student Loans Company to change the system for paying university fees to include an option for students to pay by monthly direct debit.

### Stranmillis University College Board of Governors

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the reasons for Protestant clergy no longer being allowed, as of right, to sit on the Board of Governors of Stranmillis College. (AQO 2318/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In 2005 legal advice ruled that it would have been unlawful for the Department to permit Protestant clergy to sit, as of right, on the Board of Governors of Stranmillis College.

Stranmillis College was incorporated under The Colleges of Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 which is subordinate to the Northern Ireland Acts of 1998 and 2000. Section 6 of the 1998 Act, when read with the 2000 Act, provides that an Order in Council cannot contain a provision which discriminates against a class of persons on the grounds of religious belief or political opinion. To allow Protestant clergy to sit, as of right, on the Board of Governors would have discriminated against other religious groupings and would have been unlawful.

### Further Education Pay

**Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning who took the decision, and when it was taken, that further education pay was covered by the Northern Ireland Civil Service Pay Restraint rather than the Public Sector Pay Restraint. (AQO 2320/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The application of pay policy is a devolved matter for the Northern Ireland Executive. In May 2007, the Executive adopted Civil Service Pay Guidance, which includes

specific pay thresholds, for application to the wider public sector. In line with other public sector groups, the guidance was deemed to apply to Further Education lecturers in Northern Ireland.

### STEM Subjects

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how he intends to encourage more students to take up STEM subjects as part of his plans to improve the skills base of the workforce. (AQO 2321/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I am currently waiting on the publication of the STEM Review. Once received, my Department will make a prompt response to the report recommendations and any resource implications it may contain. In addition to this, my Department is currently in the process of commissioning research into the possibility of providing bursaries or scholarships for STEM students.

### Queen's University: Land Development

**Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has held discussions with Queen's University, Belfast on any proposal it may have to permit a private property business to develop its land.

(AQO 2322/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I have received assurances that Queen's University, Belfast does not have any proposal to permit a private property business to develop its land.

### Higher Education Land and Accommodation Strategy

**Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he is preparing a protocol with institutions of higher education, governing acquisition or disposal of land, to ensure that his Department is properly involved in any higher education land and accommodation strategy. (AQO 2323/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I am not preparing a protocol with the institutions of higher education governing acquisition or disposal of land to ensure that my Department is properly involved in any higher education land and accommodation strategy.

These matters are covered under the terms of the Financial Memorandum with my Department. The universities and university colleges are required to keep their holdings of land and buildings under review, with the objective of rationalising and disposing of those which they consider, in light of their estate strategy, to be no longer needed. The Financial Memorandum places conditions on the sale of any property with an exchequer interest. These include the need to notify, or consult with, my Department in advance of such a sale and the possibility of money being recouped from the proceeds where they are not being reinvested.

### Belfast Metropolitan College: Relocation

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the progress of Belfast Metropolitan College relocating to the Titanic Quarter. (AQO 2324/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Negotiations to achieve financial closure on this project have been intense and despite the extreme market conditions and without pre-empting the commercial issues I would anticipate contract signing within the next month. Construction can begin immediately upon signing and service commencement would be scheduled for July 2011.

### Redundancies: South Down

**Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to address recent redundancies in South Down. (AQO 2325/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Department provides information and advice to those made redundant in South Down to help them find alternative employment or identify opportunities to retrain

under the Department's employment and training programmes. In a number of cases the Jobs & Benefits staff were able to deliver on-site clinics directly to those who had received notices of redundancy. All redundant workers who call to the Jobs & Benefits office are given the full range of employment services.

## DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

### Ten-Day Payment Target

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much of the total amount due to suppliers was paid within the ten-day payment target, in the last year. (AQW 5823/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster):** The Department complies with the Prompt Payment Code and its annual resource accounts provide information on prompt payment. However, in the last year the amount paid to suppliers within 10 days is not available. Following Minister Dodds announcement on 28 November 2008, information on the time taken to process payments against the 10 working day target is now being produced.

### Project Kelvin

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the Project Kelvin Invitation to Tender document, when (i) MPD International was appointed project consultants; and (ii) the tender for consultancy services was advertised in the European Journal. (AQW 5871/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Following a full procurement process, managed by the Central Procurement Directorate (DFP), MPD International was appointed on the 18th February 2008.

The tender for technical consultants for Project Kelvin was advertised in the EU journal on the 12 December 2007.

### Project Kelvin

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to the Project Kelvin Invitation to Tender document, if her Department was informed that MPD International's Managing Director was a former senior employee of Hibernia Atlantic and if so, was it before it was awarded the contract for consultancy services. (AQW 5872/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** MPD International made it clear in the January 2008 tender submitted for the consultancy contract that its Managing Director (MD) had previously worked for a range of telecommunications and other companies, including Hibernia Atlantic prior to the setting up of MPD International in 2006.

As part of their submission, MPD provided a signed warrant stating that there would be no conflict or perceived conflict of interest in relation to the personnel or type of work involved in this contract. Central Procurement Directorate (DFP), who managed the tender process, was satisfied that there was no conflict of interest. The contract was awarded to MPD International in February 2008.

### Project Kelvin

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the Project Kelvin Invitation to Tender document, how long was MPD International in existence before it was awarded the contract by her Department. (AQW 5873/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** According to the information provided by the company, MPD International was formed in 2006.

MPD International was appointed by the Department as technical consultants for Project Kelvin in February 2008.

### Project Kelvin

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if Hibernia Atlantic completed Principal Schedule 4 of the Project Kelvin Invitation to Tender document in its tender submission; and (ii) if her Department was aware of any potential conflict of interest prior to awarding either the contract for consultancy services or the actual contract for the Submarine Cable Works. (AQW 5874/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The tender process for this project was managed by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), DFP. CPD has indicated that Hibernia Atlantic completed and submitted Principal Schedule 4.

Hibernia Atlantic indicated 2 possible conflicts of interest (i) the Managing Director of MPD International had been the CEO of Hibernia Atlantic until the end of 2004; (ii) that Arthur Cox act as the legal representation for Hibernia Atlantic in the Republic of Ireland but that it would not use Arthur Cox for this contract, therefore there would be no conflict. CPD considered both matters and concluded there was no conflict of interest.

### Project Kelvin

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Managing Director of MPD International played any part in the Project Kelvin tender and if he attended any meetings with any of the tenderers. (AQW 5875/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Prior to the issue of the Invitation to Tender (ITT), the Managing Director (MD) of MPD International accompanied representatives of the Departments and Central Procurement Directorate (DFP) to a number of meetings with companies who operate international telecommunications networks. The purpose of these meetings was to assess the level of interest the companies might have in the project.

The MD was not directly involved in the subsequent development of the ITT and he did not attend any meetings after the issue of the ITT, either with the Department or with the tenderers.

### Mourne National Park

**Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on (i) the progress to promote the Mourne National Park as one of the five signature projects; and (ii) her Department's timetable for achieving a 40% increase in tourism in the area by 2015. (AQW 5881/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The designation of the Mournes as a National Park is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment. NITB was a member of the Mourne National Park Working Party and has influenced this debate over the last 5 years. Should the area achieve designation it has been identified that tourism in the wider area has the potential to generate a growth of £221 million and account for 4,700 jobs by 2020.

The Mourne Signature Project (MSP) was identified on the basis that the Mournes could be Northern Ireland's first National Park. However, NITB is progressing with the MSP regardless of designation as the area has still to realise its full tourism potential. NITB has recently received several applications for financial assistance under its Tourism Development Scheme. These are currently being assessed.

The Programme for Government has set targets to increase out-of-state visitors by 25% to 2.5million and spend by 40% to £520million by 2011. The Signature Projects, including the Mourne Signature Project, are key to achieving international stand out for Northern Ireland and helping achieve these ambitious targets.

### Foreign Direct Investment Jobs

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many foreign direct investment jobs have been announced since the agreement of the Programme for Government. (AQW 5887/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** From 1 April 2008 to date, 1,786 jobs have been announced as the result of investment in Northern Ireland by externally-owned businesses.

These businesses have been offered £12million of assistance by Invest NI, which contributes towards a total planned investment of £71.5million.

### Review of Public Administration

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment which functions will transfer from her Department to local government under the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 5943/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** DETI will transfer, from Invest NI and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, a number of local economic development and tourism activities to the new local councils.

- In relation to local economic development the following activities will transfer;
- Small Business Support Programme, replacement for Start a Business Programme
- Youth Entrepreneurship
- Social Entrepreneurship Programme

The new Small Business Support Programme incorporates Investing in Women and Neighbourhood Renewal activities which were previously delivered separately.

- The following local tourism activities will transfer;
- Local Product Development & Marketing
- Visitor Servicing
- Business Support
- Support for small scale tourist accommodation

My officials are working with their local government counterparts, within the implementation structures established by the DOE, to consider the practical arrangements for integrating these functions within local government.

### Natural Gas Network

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has for extending the natural gas network. (AQW 5947/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** DETI is presently developing a new Strategic Energy Framework for Northern Ireland. The overall emphasis for the Framework will be a shift towards a cleaner and more efficient energy mix, including greater use of renewable energy sources, and extending the benefits of natural gas as a low carbon fuel where this is appropriate.

In furtherance of this objective, the Department is considering the economics of taking natural gas to towns in the West and North-West of Northern Ireland and will shortly be commissioning a study to determine the technical and economic feasibility of bringing gas to towns such as Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon, Strabane, Omagh, and Enniskillen.

In parallel, the Department is also considering the merits of a proposal to take natural gas to towns in the Downpatrick economic corridor in East Down.

### Local Manufacturing Industry

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the state of the local manufacturing industry. (AQW 5956/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The latest official statistics indicate that manufacturing output remained constant in the third quarter of 2008, and it has increased by 3.5% since the third quarter of 2007. This compares favorably with the contraction of 2.3% in manufacturing output over the last year in the UK as a whole. However, official statistics are now beginning to reveal falling employment and significant redundancies in manufacturing. The sector accounted for 77% (2,220) of total redundancies over the year to the end of January 2009.

Furthermore, local businesses, including those in the manufacturing sector, are facing increasing challenges as a result of the deterioration in global economic conditions. The slowdown in key export markets such as GB, Europe and the US is likely to result in a fall in demand for locally produced manufacturing goods.

However, it should be noted that the recent decline in the value of sterling against both the euro and the dollar should help improve the competitiveness of our exports. Invest NI will continue to work with local firms to help them take advantage of trade opportunities in the Eurozone and elsewhere.

### Invest NI

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for the total amount that Invest NI has spent in seeking to attract investment into the Upper Bann constituency. (AQW 5980/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** In answering the question, I have assumed that you are referring to the marketing and sales budget allocated to attracting inward investment, both first time and follow-on.

Invest NI's international marketing and sales budget is entirely devoted to attracting investment into Northern Ireland as a single entity. As such, it is not sub-divided into regional allocations as to do so would be ineffective, inefficient and ultimately confusing to the client. To put this into some perspective, Northern Ireland is a small country that is smaller in size than a large number of County Councils in Great Britain.

When an investor has agreed to locate in Northern Ireland as a result of Invest NI's promotional efforts, which will normally include an offer of financial assistance, it will choose a location that offers the best business sense. Invest NI has limited ability to influence this decision, although it does attempt to showcase a variety of locations across Northern Ireland that broadly fit the basic project parameters presented.

### Broadband Provision

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her plans to ensure parity in broadband provision for rural dwellers who presently only receive basic broadband packages. (AQW 6026/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Under the Programme for Government a number of activities specifically support the strategic priority of "Growing A Dynamic, Innovative Economy" and contribute to PSA 1 "Productivity Growth". In relation to broadband these include undertaking a range of broadband stimulation activities to encourage the take-up and innovative use of telecommunications by businesses and to develop Northern Ireland's next generation network for businesses.

In August 2008 I announced that £1.9million of EU and Government money had been set aside under the Northern Ireland Broadband Fund to offer financial support to businesses undertaking technology trials, which offer opportunities for the future commercial rollout of high speed broadband services. The fund had a particular focus on the delivery of broadband services into rural areas. Two calls have taken place already which has resulted in two projects that will bring high speed services to many rural areas of Northern Ireland. I intend to open a third call in April 2009.

In January 2009 I announced that the Department had signed a three year contract with Avanti Communications to continue to provide broadband services to customers in Northern Ireland that cannot currently access broadband services via a fixed-line solution. In addition to the basic broadband service the company can deliver higher speeds should customers wish to purchase them.

I also intend to begin a procurement process, subject to the necessary approvals being agreed, seeking to appoint suitably qualified suppliers to begin building suitable infrastructure that will enable 85% of businesses in Northern Ireland, many of whom are in rural areas, access to next generation broadband services.

The issue of broadband is also one of the areas being studied under Lord Carter's Digital Britain Action Plan. The plan is to secure the UK's place at the forefront of innovation, investment and quality in the digital and communications industries. My department will be contributing to the development of this plan as appropriate.

The EU has also indicated that it is earmarking funding to help rural areas get online, bring new jobs and help businesses grow. We understand that the funding stream would be through DARD and DETI officials have met DARD to inform them of our work in this area to ensure the funds compliment existing programmes.

### Coal Providers

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she has had discussions with coal providers about price reductions in relation to the recent decrease in the price of oil and gas. (AQW 6048/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I have had no discussions with coal providers about price reductions in relation to the recent decreases in the price of oil and gas. Unlike natural gas and electricity, the coal industry in Northern Ireland is unregulated and the Department has no role in coal pricing which is entirely the responsibility of coal importers, wholesalers and retailers.

### Distribution of Department Publications

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6082/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** In accordance with the OFMDFM guidance on Distribution of Departmental Publications and Consultation Documents, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment routinely makes publications available in hard copy format to a range of identified recipients and more generally in electronic format through its website. In addition publications are provided in hard copy format to others on request.

### Tourism Ireland

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the expenditure figure for Tourism Ireland was broken down between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the financial years 2007/08 and 2008/09. (AQW 6162/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** My Department funds Tourism Ireland on a financial year basis. The expenditure figure for 2007/08 is £14.538m. The figure for 2008/09 is not yet available.

The Republic of Ireland Department of Art, Sport and Tourism funds Tourism Ireland on a calendar year basis and in Euros. The expenditure figure for 2007 is €51.255m. The figure for 2008 is €53.639m. The figure for 2009 is not yet available.

### HR Connect

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an estimate of how many hours have been lost by individuals and their managers trying to resolve a query with HR Connect. (AQW 6201/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The information requested is not routinely collected and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

### Local Enterprise Agencies

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) how many Local Enterprise Agencies she has visited, since taking up office (ii) the names of those visited; and (iii) the dates of the visits. (AQW 6229/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Since taking up office as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on 10 June 2008 I have visited the following Local Enterprise Agencies:-

1. Enniskillen Business Centre 30 June 2008
2. Omagh Enterprise Company 23 July 2008
3. East Belfast Enterprise Ltd 19 September 2008

I have also met with representatives from Townsend Enterprise Park in Parliament Buildings on 2 December 2008.

I am due to attend Enterprise Northern Ireland's AGM on 30 April 2009 to be held in one of the Local Enterprise Agencies.

### **Newry and Mourne Enterprise Agency**

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she would accept an invitation to visit (i) Newry and Mourne Enterprise Agency; and (ii) Armagh Business Centre. (AQW 6230/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I have recently accepted an invitation from Newry & Mourne Enterprise Agency, subject to diary commitments, and would be happy to consider an invitation from Armagh Business Centre at some stage in the future.

### **Departmental Accounts**

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to outline the process by which her Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits her Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail her Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6261/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The Comptroller and Auditor General of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) is the Department's appointed independent external auditor under the Government Resources and Accounts Act (NI) 2001. The accounts are audited in line with the NIAO's audit plan each year.

The accounts are published each year and are available from the Assembly Library and The Stationery Office. The Department has received an unqualified audit opinion in each of the last three years.

### **Economic Downturn: Assistance for SMEs**

**Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance is being offered to small and medium sized enterprises facing difficulties in the global economic downturn. (AQO 2329/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI is implementing a number of new initiatives designed to offer financial support and practical advice to its SME clients during the economic downturn.

Since September 2008, it has held 10 seminars on the theme of "Navigating through challenging times". These have attracted almost 700 attendees and feedback has been extremely positive. A further event will be held in Omagh at the end of this month.

Up to 5 days diagnostic consultancy support, provided free of charge, is available on a range of key business issues, including working capital and cash flow management. Where suitable projects are then identified, clients can then obtain up to 50% financial support towards eligible project costs from Invest NI's new £5 million Accelerated Support Fund.

Invest NI's support is not restricted to its clients. Working in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland, the District Councils and the NI Chamber of Commerce, it developed a programme to provide the wider local business community with practical advice and guidance. There have been 10 events organised to date across Northern Ireland, all of which have been well attended. I understand that the feedback from these has also been consistently positive.

Going forward, we will continue to work with companies and, where possible, assist them to mitigate the impact of the downturn, and to enable them to prepare for a future upturn.

### **Upper Bann: DETI Assistance for Businesses**

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to assist businesses in Upper Bann. (AQO 2335/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest Northern Ireland continues to provide assistance to its clients in Upper Bann through a range of programmes designed to encourage improved international competitiveness.

In the current financial year, Invest NI has approved 113 offers of support to its client companies in the Upper Bann parliamentary constituency. These relate to £8.4 million of financial commitments contributing towards gross investment of £25.6 million.

Invest NI has also invested over £1 million in infrastructure works at three of its industrial estates at Charlestown Road Business Park in Portadown, Halfpenny Valley Industrial Estate in Lurgan and Mandeville Business Park in Craigavon. These development works will ensure that serviced sites are available for future investment projects.

Working in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland, the District Councils and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, Invest NI has also offered the wider local business community the opportunity to avail of practical advice and guidance to assist them navigate through the current economic downturn. 10 information seminars have been held to date, including one in Banbridge. Over 50 businesses came to the Banbridge event, which I also personally attended. I understand that the feedback from this, like all the others, has been positive and most encouraging.

### **Manufacturing Companies: Assistance with Cashflow Difficulties**

**Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance is being offered to manufacturing companies which have cashflow difficulties. (AQO 2336/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI has, for some months now, been implementing a number of initiatives designed to assist its clients mitigate the impact of a sustained economic downturn. The provision of professional advice relating to the management of working capital and cash flow has been a priority.

Invest NI has held 10 seminars on the theme of “Navigating through challenging times”. These have attracted almost 700 attendees. Participation at these events can result in up to 5 days specialist consultancy support, provided free of charge, in a variety of business-related areas, including cash flow management. Where suitable projects are identified, clients can then obtain 50% support from Invest NI’s new £5 million Accelerated Support Fund.

Working in partnership with Enterprise NI, the District Councils and the NI Chamber of Commerce, Invest NI has also developed a programme that offers the wider local business community an opportunity to avail of specific advice and guidance regarding the current economic climate.

In January this year, Lord Mandelson announced a number of UK-wide business initiatives designed to encourage the provision of credit, including the Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme. This scheme guarantees up to 75% of loans to businesses and the loans can be used for investment or working capital. The scheme is operated in Northern Ireland by the Bank of Ireland and the Northern and Ulster Banks. Invest NI is encouraging its clients to discuss opportunities under this scheme with their banks.

Northern Ireland has also been included in a new grant measure under the European Commission’s temporary state aid framework. This UK-wide measure aims to support companies whose financial position has been adversely affected by the credit squeeze by providing them with up to £500k of support. Invest NI is currently working with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform and other UK regions to establish how any scheme might be deployed in Northern Ireland. It is hoped that an announcement regarding a new scheme can be made in April.

### **Debt Relief Scheme**

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the current economic difficulties, what consideration she has given to fast-tracking her Department’s proposed debt relief scheme. (AQO 2337/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** While I am keen that the legislation is put in place as soon as possible, I am also aware that the Assembly’s Enterprise Trade & Investment Committee is concerned about the possible impact on small businesses. I will, therefore, want to give full consideration to the outcome of the current consultation process before considering whether there is a case for fast-tracking, the effect of which would be to limit the opportunity for Members to debate the detail of the scheme.

### Mobile Phone Charges: Border Areas

**Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail her Department's efforts to overcome the problems of roaming mobile phone charges in border areas. (AQO 2338/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Mobile roaming is a world-wide issue which affects those making and receiving mobile phone calls in border areas.

Between 2004 and 2007, my Department worked with the UK telecommunications regulator, the Irish telecommunications regulator and officials in the Republic of Ireland on mobile phone roaming in border areas. Significant progress was made in addressing the issue, including the introduction of all-island tariffs and special tariff initiatives for phone users by various mobile phone companies north and south. These measures significantly reduced the scale of the problem.

Efforts were also made by the industry and the regulators to publicise these tariffs through websites and adverts. Some operators also developed systems whereby a text message is sent to the user to make them aware that their mobile handset has roamed onto another operator's network.

Then, in August 2007, the European Union capped roaming tariffs across all of Europe. This led to significant tariff reductions for all mobile phone users. Later this year, the EU is planning to introduce further tariff reductions on the cost of voice calls across Europe. The EU is also planning to cap the cost of sending text messages while travelling in another EU country.

My Department is continuing to monitor the situation and liaise with the regulator.

### Public Procurement: Applications from SMEs

**Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to making public procurement procedures less complicated in order to encourage applications from small and medium sized enterprises. (AQO 2339/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Public sector procurement procedures are highly regulated in the European Union through Directives. The current procurement directives were transposed into UK National law on 31st January 2006 as The Public Contracts Regulations (2006) and the Utilities Contracts Regulations (2006). These regulations apply to contracts above a published threshold. The Public Contracts Regulations (2006) apply to service contracts above the threshold of £90,319 in DETI and above the threshold of £139,893 for our NDPBs. The Utilities Contracts Regulations (2006) apply to utilities contracts above the threshold of £279,785.

All Public Sector contracts, irrespective of value, are covered by the EC Treaty principles which include the free movement of goods and services, non-discrimination and transparency.

In order to increase accessibility to public tenders and to streamline and standardise processes, the Procurement Board, chaired by the Minister for Finance and Personnel, endorsed a recommendation that Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs) implement an electronic sourcing system as the single portal for all government procurement activities within Northern Ireland.

This 'e-Sourcing NI' system is now fully operational within CPD and plans are underway to implement the system across all CoPEs. It will assist in the simplification and standardisation of procedures and reduce both the time and costs of the registration and bidding processes. The single portal will maximise the visibility of business opportunities and make it easier for companies, particularly SMEs to bid for potential work.

In addition Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) provides support to both SMEs and Social Economy Enterprises (SEEs) to raise awareness and a better understanding of public procurement procedures. This includes a number of actions:

- (i) Regular engagement with representative and lead bodies from both the SME and SEE sectors and the Construction Industry, including supporting 'meet the buyer' events and supplier education programmes.
- (ii) In addition to this, individual suppliers can request information and clarification on specific tenders from CPD and are routinely offered debriefs on the quality of their tenders in order to assist them to compete more effectively for future opportunities.

- (iii) Agreement with the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland (CIFNI) that all new public sector contracts from December 2008, will require main contractors to publish opportunities within their supply chain, and encourage SMEs to join together as consortia to bid for larger contracts or to look for opportunities within the supply chains that will be formed by the successful tenderer.

CPD has also published guidance for SMEs and SEEs seeking to do business with the public sector. A companion guide for public sector purchasers on steps to help remove barriers faced by these suppliers has also been published. This guidance is available on CPD's website.

The recently established Construction Industry Forum – Procurement Task Group will consider how to further maximise the opportunities for SMEs to bid for, or benefit from, public sector construction contracts.

### **Invest NI: Land Sales**

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the area of Invest NI land that was sold to new clients and to existing clients during the last three years. (AQO 2340/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** In the three years from April 2006 to March 2009, Invest NI sold 208 acres of land to its client companies.

60 clients made first time purchases totalling 182 acres, while 14 clients purchased 26 acres of additional land for expansion projects.

The provision of high-quality serviced sites for industrial development at strategic locations across Northern Ireland is a key goal of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. Invest NI has a target to acquire and/or develop an additional 200 acres of land by 2012.

Serviced sites are provided to client companies with an identifiable and viable development project in locations where there is clear evidence of market failure.

### **Foreign Direct Investment**

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the current level of foreign direct investment compares to the levels anticipated following publication of the Programme for Government. (AQO 2341/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The provisional data for those projects approved in the year to date suggests that Invest NI's 2008/09 Operating Plan inward investment targets will be achieved. These comprise targets for jobs promoted, quality of jobs, and wages and salaries secured.

A number of approved projects have not yet been announced and may well now be delayed until more favourable economic conditions arise. Nonetheless, significant investments have been announced from companies such as Bombardier, Firstsource, Fujitsu and BTI Systems.

Looking longer term into 2009/10 and 2010/11, the pipeline for new projects is not favourable. It shows a significant reduction in project numbers compared to the same point in 2007/08.

As you will understand, the economic situation is still too volatile to predict with any precision. However, the project cycle for inward investment can take 18 to 24 months to complete and Invest NI is confident that, in the medium to longer term, Northern Ireland will benefit from the opportunity that the USNI conference afforded to Northern Ireland.

I remain cautiously optimistic that new opportunities may emerge and, when they do, Northern Ireland businesses will be well placed to exploit the opportunities that arise.

### **Titanic Signature Project**

**Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the Titanic Project. (AQO 2342/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The Executive agreed to offer up to £43.5 million towards Titanic Quarter Limited's proposal for a Titanic Signature Project, with the balance of funding being provided by Titanic Quarter Limited, Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Belfast City Council.

The Executive's funding is subject to the satisfactory completion of commercial discussions and funding conditions with Titanic Quarter Limited, and the conclusion of a legal agreement between all funders.

All parties are working intensively on the commercial, funding and legal issues.

### Redundancies: Past 12 Months

**Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many redundancies there have been in the last twelve months. (AQO 2343/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** There were 3,536 proposed redundancies and 2,882 confirmed redundancies in Northern Ireland in the twelve month period from 1st February 2008 to 31st January 2009.

Under the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, companies are only legally required to notify the Department of impending redundancies of 20 or more employees.

### Invest NI Assistance: Eligibility Criteria

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she would consider redefining the criteria for local businesses to be eligible for Invest NI assistance to increase the number of companies that qualify. (AQO 2344/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI's clients are manufacturing and tradable service businesses that demonstrate the greatest export potential and the prospect of improving productivity by becoming more internationally competitive. To qualify as a client, businesses need to 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, the additional qualifying criteria are;

- that they have 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.

The economic and policy justification for intervening with companies that are focused only on supplying the local Northern Ireland market is not strong. Such intervention could lead to market distortion and, as a result, job displacement. Both are contrary to EU intervention rules, would be of questionable economic benefit to the local or national economy, and would not deliver good value for money from Invest NI's finite resources.

Any business in Northern Ireland can avail of advice provided through Invest NI's 'NI Business Information' web site. In addition, non-clients can also participate on Invest NI trade missions provided they are interested in becoming an exporter and they are either a manufacturer or an international service provider.

The eligibility criteria for qualification as an Invest NI client are not onerous. In addition, Invest NI must apply its policy levers and limited resources to as far as possible maximise the economic impact. As such, there are no plans to revisit the current definition.

### Pharmaceutical Industries: Investment Potential

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment which geographical areas are designated by Invest NI as having potential for investment in pharmaceutical industries; and what capabilities are being developed in those areas. (AQO 2345/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** There are no geographical areas within Northern Ireland that have been specifically designated by Invest NI for investment in pharmaceutical industries. Pharmaceutical companies, like any business, will choose to locate where they believe opportunities are maximised and the investment risk is minimised. Location-decisions take account of access to labour and skills, infrastructure and property, transportation linkages, linkages to academia, and the availability of financial assistance.

Invest NI has limited scope for directing investment to specific geographical areas.

Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and the opportunities and benefits that arise from investment decisions are not constrained by boundaries such as those of District Council or Parliamentary Constituency Areas. These are not self-contained labour markets and companies draw their workforces from beyond such boundaries.

Two of Northern Ireland's most successful pharmaceutical companies, Almac and Randox, for example, draw staff from wide catchment areas that extend well beyond their respective locations in Craigavon and Antrim.

## DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

### Planning Policy Statement 5

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the development of Planning Policy Statement 5, and when he plans to introduce the revised statement. (AQW 5938/09)

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** Work is ongoing on PPS 5. However it is difficult at present to provide a definitive date for publication of the PPS pending the outcome of a judicial challenge which was heard in the High Court in January 2009.

### 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 three years. (AQW 6012/09)

**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.

### Disposal of Unlicensed Motor Vehicles

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment how much was reclaimed by the Department for the removal and disposal of unlicensed motor vehicles in each constituency, in the last three years. (AQW 6033/09)

**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).

The arrangement for the removal and disposal of unlicensed motor vehicles is contained within the UK-Wide contract which was awarded and is administered by the Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) Swansea.

### Fisheries Management

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment if he could confirm whether Fisheries Management is included in the Northern Ireland Marine Bill. (AQW 6057/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Responsibility for fisheries rests with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, in the context of policy development for the Northern Ireland Marine Bill, I will be considering with Ministerial colleagues how all activities in the marine area might be managed in a more holistic and integrated way.

### Footpath Provision

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of the Environment what criteria is applied by Planning Service for footpath provision in proposed residential developments for which planning approval is sought. (AQW 6068/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Planning Policy for the assessment of residential development is set out in Planning Policy Statement 7, Quality Residential Environments. Policy QD1 of PPS7 states that all residential proposals should have greater regard for sustainable movement patterns and should seek to reduce reliance on the private car. Consideration of matters such as pedestrian movements must be built into the design of a proposed development from the outset. In addition, supplementary planning guidance on the provision, positioning and detailed design of footpaths in residential developments is set out in Creating Places, Achieving Quality in Residential Developments.

In the determination of planning applications, my Department will consult with DRD Roads Service which provides specialist information and transportation advice on roads related matters associated with residential development.

The Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 and the Private Streets (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 provide the statutory basis for the adoption of roads, including footpaths, constructed by developers for future maintenance by the Roads Service.

Following consideration and agreement from Planning Service and Roads Service on the form and layout of the proposal, developers should indicate on the plans submitted for approval those areas including footpaths that are to be adopted for future maintenance by the Roads Service.

### Footpaths in Housing Developments

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of the Environment how many enforcement actions have been taken for failure to complete footpaths in housing developments, in each of the past 3 years, in each parliamentary constituency. (AQW 6069/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department does not at present hold centrally statistics on enforcement cases. To provide accurate figures for the information requested would require manual checking of files which is not only disproportionate in terms of time and cost but would result in un-validated statistics being released. This would be contrary to the Code of Practice for the release of official statistics published in January 2009 ahead of the enactment of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 on 1 April 2009.

My Department has been working to improve the recording of Enforcement Cases, including modifying the existing data base and the inputting of data is ongoing, but this will take some time. When this exercise is complete the data validated statistics on Enforcement will be available.

### Distribution of Department Publications

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6079/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department follows the guidance issued by OFMdfM on the distribution of publications to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Where there is a statutory requirement to provide hard copies of documents to certain recipients, including political representatives, my Department follows the procedures outlined in the guidance referred to above. In addition, my Department ensures that copies of all documents are available in electronic format and that all recipients are given the option of obtaining a copy in that format.

If there is no requirement for a publication to be laid before the Assembly but it is considered to be of sufficient interest to MLAs then my Department would distribute it to the Assembly by the "Papers Presented" route. Under this procedure copies are sent to the Assembly Business Office with a covering letter asking that it be included on the "Papers Presented" list, to notify MLAs where it can be obtained.

For consultations my Department uses the "Papers Presented" procedure and also writes to MLAs advising that the consultation is taking place and where they can obtain copies of the document, either in hard copy or electronic format. A standard letter copied to each MLA is sent. The letters are forwarded to Parliament Buildings, to be placed in the MLA pigeonholes.

### Rural Planning Strategy

**Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of the Environment how tourist need in Policy 3 of the Department's Rural Planning Strategy is defined for assessing planning applications for tourism accommodation in the countryside. (AQW 6098/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** There is no definition of tourist need in relation to Policy Tou 3 in the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland.

### Rural Planning Strategy

**Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of the Environment whether proposals to extend an existing tourist facility in the countryside to provide complementary tourist accommodation are required to demonstrate tourist need as outlined in Policy TOU 3 of the Rural Planning Strategy. (AQW 6100/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** In assessing applications for all rural tourist accommodation including a proposal to extend an existing facility the need for the development is material to the determination of a planning application including extensions to existing tourist accommodation. A range of information may be requested by my Department in order to demonstrate a need for tourist accommodation. This will be dependent on the nature, scale and location of the extension to the development and may include one or a number of the following:

- expressions of support from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and other appropriate bodies such as local community groups or tourism based organisations;
- expressions of support from local elected representatives and District or Borough Council;
- a 'Tourism Need Statement' which would demonstrate that the development would be in the public interest in terms of inward investment and employment opportunity;
- where applicable, confirmation of grant-aid funding in order to facilitate the tourism accommodation;
- a feasibility study for consideration and assessment by the Economics Branch in the Department for Regional Development which provides this service to the Department;

A minor extension to provide ancillary accommodation eg a toilet block, car park or similar facility would not, however, require this type of assessment.

### Rural Planning Strategy

**Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of the Environment what information or details must accompany a planning application for tourist accommodation in the countryside, including proposals to provide accommodation in conjunction with existing tourist facilities, to ensure that it meets the Department's requirement, in Policy TOU 3 of the Rural Planning Strategy that such accommodation should meet a clearly identified tourist need. (AQW 6101/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** As detailed in AQW 6100/09 in assessing applications for rural tourist accommodation the need for the development is material to the determination of a planning application including

extensions to existing tourist accommodation. A range of information may be requested by my Department in order to demonstrate a need for tourist accommodation. This will be dependent on the nature, scale and location of the development proposed and may include one or a number of the following:

- expressions of support from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and other appropriate bodies such as local community groups or tourism based organisations;
- expressions of support from local elected representatives;
- a 'Tourism Need Statement' which would demonstrate that the development would be in the public interest in terms of inward investment and employment opportunity;
- where applicable, confirmation of grant-aid funding in order to facilitate the tourism accommodation;
- a feasibility study for consideration and assessment by the Economics Branch in the Department for Regional Development which provides this service to the Department.

However a proposal for a small scale complementary facility e.g. a play area, small recreational building or similar scale and type of facility, which is clearly ancillary to the tourist accommodation would not require such an assessment.

### Planning Applications

**Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister of the Environment what the minimum steps are that an applicant needs to take if their planning application is due to expire in the near future. (AQW 6114/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** As the timeframe for implementation of a planning approval approaches, an applicant may choose to apply for renewal of planning permission or commence development on the site.

In the consideration of a renewal application refusal would only be considered where;

- (a) there has been some material change in circumstances since the original permission was granted e.g. a change in policy
- (b) continued failure to begin the development will contribute unacceptably to uncertainty about the future pattern of development in the area; or
- (c) The application is premature because the permission has a reasonable time to run.

Over time a number of court and appeal cases have addressed the issue of commencement of development. In deciding whether or not development has commenced, the Department will consider:

- Whether the works carried out are in accordance with the relevant planning permission; and
- Whether the work carried out is material, in the sense that it is not de minimis (meaning something which is so minor as to have no legal consequence)

It is a matter of planning judgement as to whether or not development has commenced at the early stages of a project and the above test provides direction on the issue. Generally this would require

- Compliance with conditions relating to works to be carried out before the commencement of other work e.g. the construction of an access to the required standard; and
- Commencement of any work of construction in the course of the erection of the building such as the digging and pouring foundations etc.

### Ten-Day Payment Policy

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of the Environment what measures his Department has in place to ensure invoices are paid within ten-days. (AQW 6128/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department has put certain measures in place to assist in help meeting the new 10 day target for payment of invoices as follows:

- 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.

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the (i) projects; and (ii) amount of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6153/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The table below details the one project planned and the amount involved.

Project Detail	2009/10 £'000	2010/11 £'000
Crawfordsburn Country Park – refurbishment of visitors centre and erection of boundary fence	710	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>710</b>	<b>-</b>

### Planning Applications

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will issue Planning Application X/2003/0731 which has been with his Department and has been passed by all of the other relevant bodies. (AQW 6154/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** A planning permission in respect of application X/2003/0731 was issued by Planning Service on 24th February 2009.

### Chicken Waste Plant at Glenavy

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the planning application for a chicken waste plant at Glenavy and if he will ask for a public inquiry into this planning application. (AQW 6158/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The planning application, accompanied by an Environmental Statement, for a biomass fuelled power plant at Ballyvannon Road Glenavy was submitted to Planning Service on 4 June 2008. Article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 was applied to the proposal on 23 September 2008, designating the proposal as a major application.

The first round of consultations with expert consultees is now complete and has revealed the need for additional environmental information which will be addressed by way of an Addendum to the Environmental Statement. The Addendum was requested on 11 February 2009 and in accordance with the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 the applicants have 3 months from the date of the request to submit the Addendum. Upon receipt of this, Planning Service will re-advertise the application and re-notify neighbours providing the public with an opportunity to comment on the additional environmental information.

Careful consideration of the planning application and associated environmental information, and all representations made in relation to it, is necessary before I would be in a position to decide whether to proceed by way of a public inquiry as the most appropriate action. It would not be appropriate therefore at this stage to indicate whether I would call a public inquiry.

### River Pollution

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of the Environment how many (i) enforcement notices have been issued; and (ii) actions have been taken, by his Department in relation to river pollution in the North Down constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6177/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Where pollution occurs, it is the policy of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to take formal enforcement action if this is warranted by the severity of the pollution and the circumstances which led to it occurring.

The formal enforcement options available to NIEA in pollution cases include:

- the issuing of an enforcement **warning letter**, or;
- the initiation of **prosecution proceedings**, and / or;
- the issuing of a **Water Order Notice**.

Table A details the number of substantiated pollution incidents and the number of Enforcement Notices issued under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in each of the last 3 years in the North Down District Council area. Table B details the actions and outcomes to date.

**TABLE A – SUBSTANTIATED POLLUTION INCIDENTS AND WATER ORDER ENFORCEMENT NOTICES.**

	High Severity	Medium Severity	Low Severity	Enforcement Notices
2006	0	3	23	0
2007	0	5	29	1
2008	0	5	16	0

**TABLE B – ACTIONS TAKEN AND OUTCOME (AT 13 MARCH 2009)**

	Cases to the Public Prosecution Service	Convictions	Cases Pending	Warning Letters Issued
2006	1	1	0	0
2007	1	0	1	3
2008	0	0	0	1

### Reducing Stress in the Workplace

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment, given that stress is the primary reason for absence from work, to outline what actions his Department intends to bring forward to increase motivation and morale and reduce stress levels in the workplace. (AQW 6183/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Psychiatric and psychological illnesses, including stress are the main reasons for long-term sickness absence in the NICS. My Department recognises that such illnesses can lead to long-term absence from work. In DOE a significant portion of absence due to stress related illness is attributed to domestic situations or coping with life issues.

Measures are in place to help staff who experience such difficulties, including welfare support and a 24-hour employee assistance programme, which is available to staff and immediate family members. Early intervention in such cases is considered essential and immediate referral to the Occupational Health Service is made.

My Department has developed a pilot programme, Work Bridge, which blends coaching and practical actions to support the member of staff to actively plan, prepare and positively move forward towards a return to wellness at an early stage.

It is currently developing a Health Promotion Strategy to promote the health and well being of staff and we sponsor a range of work health initiatives such as Fitech and the Healthworks programme.

A series of seminars for senior managers have recently taken place to highlight the issue of stress and their responsibilities as managers. This includes detecting the early signs of stress and what action they should take to help those who are experiencing stress symptoms, and where possible, to help them remain at work. Early intervention with support from HR and Support Services is encouraged.

Regular information on health matters is made available to staff through the Department's monthly team brief and other internal publications. Information is posted to the new Health Awareness section of the DOE intranet.

A proactive approach is taken to help individuals who are absent from work due to stress related illness return to work as soon as possible. It is hoped that all these interventions taken together will go some way to improving the motivation and morale across the Department.

### Omagh Minerals Limited

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of the Environment if Omagh Minerals Limited is breaching any conditions placed against its planning approval. (AQW 6191/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** I can confirm that my Department is aware of a number of breaches of planning control in respect of the Gold Mine at Cavanacaw, Omagh.

Planning Service Headquarters, Minerals Unit is currently investigating the breach of a number of conditions of planning approval K/1992/0713.

To date the operator has co-operated with the Department and it is anticipated that there will be a satisfactory resolution to all of the breaches of planning control, some of which are technical in nature.

### Departmental Accounts

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to outline the process by which his Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits his Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail his Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6260/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:**

(i) Process

DOE's Resource Accounts are audited under the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, and in accordance with United Kingdom Auditing Standards, as issued by the Auditing Practices Board.

Prior to the audit of the annual accounts the department agrees a timetable with the auditors detailing dates for the production and audit of both interim (9 months) and year-end accounts. This enables the audit team to perform most of their audit work before the end of the financial year.

Year-end accounts are formally submitted to the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) by the Permanent Secretary (as the principal Accounting Officer) by the end of May to allow sufficient time for the audit process.

The C&AG aims to certify the annual accounts by end of June to enable the accounts to be laid before the Assembly prior to the summer recess.

(ii) The accounts are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

(iii) In each of the last three years the DOE accounts received an unqualified true and fair view opinion. The complete accounts for all three years can be found on the DOE website [www.doeni.gov.uk](http://www.doeni.gov.uk). The C&AG's opinions are on pages 52-54 (2007-08), 44-46 (2006-07) and 39-40 (2005-06).

### Planning Service

**Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the Planning Service Management Board's referral process from Councils, to detail the meetings they have had with architects/agents (outside of Council delegations) to discuss individual applications, over the past 4 years. (AQW 6269/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Management Board Referral process is part of the consultation arrangements operated for Councils in considering the Department's 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.

As a consequence, there have been no meetings with architects/agents outside of Council delegations.

## DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

### Government Transport

**Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) if any Minister used government transport (ii) in what capacity did they attend the events; and (iii) if the use of government transport was authorised, in relation to attendance at events at the North West 200 in (a) May 2007; and (b) May 2008. (AQW 4111/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds):** Ministers are supplied with official vehicles to assist them in undertaking their official duties. Guidance has been issued to Ministers on the use of transport and they are not required to seek approval for individual journeys.

### Workplace 2010 Project

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the economic circumstances of continuing with the Workplace 2010 project. (AQW 5566/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The impact of continuing with the WP2010 procurement in the current financial circumstances would have been twofold. Firstly, debt finance would have been extremely difficult to secure potentially rendering the project undeliverable at this time and secondly the value for money of the project would probably have been impaired giving rise to an unaffordable deal.

### Civil Service

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel the total number of vacant positions in each Civil Service Department and Agency in the Belfast Area. (AQW 5574/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The number of vacancies in permanent Civil Service posts located in the Belfast area, within the eleven Northern Ireland Departments and their Agencies, is set out in the attached table.

VACANCIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE PERMANENT POSTS LOCATED IN THE BELFAST AREA, IN THE 11 NORTHERN IRELAND DEPARTMENTS AND THEIR AGENCIES, AT 1 FEBRUARY 2009

Department	Number of Vacant Posts <sup>1</sup>
DARD	88.6
DCAL	26.1
DE	0
DEL	74.1
DETI	35
DFP	206
DHSSPS <sup>2</sup>	88.6
DOE	129
DRD	125
DSD <sup>3</sup>	327.4
OFMDFM	31
<b>Total</b>	<b>1130.8</b>

<sup>1</sup> Vacancies in both industrial and non-industrial permanent posts, on a full-time equivalent (FTE) basis

2 Figures at 24 February 2009

3 Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division element of DSD vacancies at 20 January 2009.

### Capital Infrastructure Projects

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much was spent on capital infrastructure projects, broken down by Departments, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 5590/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** It is currently not possible to separately identify expenditure on infrastructure projects from other capital investment.

The table attached provides information regarding total net capital investment by Northern Ireland departments for the period 2003-04 to 2007-08. The figures are based on final outturn information whilst changes in budgeting treatment mean that it is not possible to provide comparable figures for the period before 2003-04.

#### DEPARTMENTAL CAPITAL EXPENDITURE

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
DARD	32.1	36.1	37.3	42.1	43.2
DCAL	6.9	8.5	16.0	15.3	28.0
DE	145.4	149.6	126.0	132.5	157.2
DEL	39.6	42.7	51.2	53.8	46.1
DETI	33.7	56.6	37.7	24.4	15.0
DFP	41.1	2.3	11.9	43.2	51.0
DHSSPS	121.9	150.4	158.2	189.1	184.5
DOE	8.9	11.7	10.8	13.5	9.5
DRD	253.2	397.5	436.6	423.5	371.9
DSD	7.0	115.1	126.5	68.4	213.0
NIA	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	1.8
OFMDFM	-3.4	0.8	1.9	1.4	2.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>686.5</b>	<b>971.3</b>	<b>1,014.2</b>	<b>1,007.3</b>	<b>1,123.9</b>

### Civil Service

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many posts in the Civil Service are currently filled by temporary workers, broken down by (i) Department; and (ii) grade. (AQW 5594/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The number and grades of posts in the 11 Northern Ireland Departments and their Agencies currently filled by temporary workers are set out in the attached table. The figures, covering both industrial and non-industrial posts, are on a full-time equivalent (FTE) basis.

For the purpose of this question, the term “temporary workers” covers staff employed on casual or fixed term contracts and agency staff.

**NICS POSTS FILLED BY TEMPORARY WORKERS BY DEPARTMENT AND GRADE  
CASUAL AND FIXED TERM STAFF AT 25 FEBRUARY 2009  
AGENCY STAFF AT 23 JANUARY 2009**

Department	Grade	Casual /Fixed Term Staff	Agency Staff	Total
Agriculture & Rural Development (DARD)	Administrative Officer	3		3
	Administrative Assistant	42	3	45
	Support Grade Band 2	3		3
	Deputy Principal Accountant		1	1
	Staff Officer Accountant		1	1
	Student	3		3
<b>DARD Total</b>		<b>51</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>56</b>
Culture, Arts & Leisure (DCAL)	Deputy Principal		2	2
	Staff Officer		1	1
	Administrative Assistant	4		4
	Support Grade Band 2	3		3
	Student	1		1
<b>DCAL Total</b>		<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>
Education (DE)	Executive Officer		3	3
	AO/AA		4	4
	AA	7		7
	Personal Secretary		1	1
	Receptionist		1	1
	Support Grade Band 2		5	5
<b>DE Total</b>		<b>7</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>21</b>
Employment & Learning (DEL)	Administrative Officer		3	3
	Administrative Assistant	55		55
	Support Grade Band 2	7		7
	Messenger		1	1
	Deputy Principal Accountant		1	1
	Staff Officer Accountant		2	2
	Student	2		2
<b>DEL Total</b>		<b>64</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>71</b>
Enterprise, Trade & Investment (DETI)	Administrative Assistant	4		4
	Support Grade Band 2	5		5
	Student	1		1
<b>DETI Total</b>		<b>10</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>

Department	Grade	Casual /Fixed Term Staff	Agency Staff	Total
Finance & Personnel (DFP)	Deputy Principal		1	1
	Staff Officer		4	4
	Administrative Officer		51	51
	Administrative Assistant	37	18	55
	Personal Secretary		2	2
	Support Grade Band 2	5	6	11
	Accountant		7	7
	Senior Principal Legal Officer <sup>1</sup>	1		1
	Principal Legal Officer <sup>1</sup>	1		1
	ICT 5 Systems Analyst		1	1
	ICT 4 Programmer Analyst		1	1
	ICT 2 Technician		5	5
	Programmer		1	1
	Registered Nurse		1	1
	Healthcare Assistant		1	1
	Professional Technical Officer		9	9
	Architectural Technician		3	3
	Student	26		26
<b>DFP Total</b>		<b>70</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>181</b>
Health, Social Services & Public Safety (DHSSPS)	Administrative Assistant	13	4	17
	Personal Secretary		2	2
	Support Grade Band 2	6		6
	Deputy Principal Accountant		1	1
	ICT 4 Programmer Analyst		1	1
	Student	1		1
<b>DHSSPS Total</b>		<b>20</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>28</b>
Environment (DOE) <sup>2</sup>	Staff Officer		3	3
	Executive Officer 1/Professional Technical Officers	15	42	57
	Executive Officer 2		14	14
	Administrative Officer		61	61
	Administrative Assistant	75	21	96
	Industrial		34	34
<b>DOE Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>265</b>

Department	Grade	Casual /Fixed Term Staff	Agency Staff	Total
Regional Development (DRD)	Deputy Principal		1	1
	Staff Officer		1	1
	Executive Officer 2		2	2
	Administrative Officer		20	20
	Administrative Assistant	12	22	34
	Personal Secretary		1	1
	Typist		1	1
	Porter		1	1
	Accountant		1	1
	Deputy Principal Accountant		2	2
	Staff Officer Accountant		4	4
	PTO		3	3
	Technical Grade 1		2	2
	Technical Grade 2		5	5
	Industrial	29		29
<b>DRD Total</b>		<b>41</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>107</b>
Social Development (DSD) <sup>3</sup>	Administrative Officer	1	2	3
	Administrative Assistant	190.2	45	235.2
	Personal Secretary	1		1
	Support Grade Band 2	59	12	71
	Staff Officer Accountant	2		2
	Medical Attendant	1.6		1.6
	Student	2		2
<b>DSD Total</b>		<b>256.8</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>315.8</b>
Office of the First & Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)	Administrative Assistant	1	1	2
<b>OFMDFM Total</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>NICS TOTAL</b>		<b>618.8</b>	<b>449</b>	<b>1067.8</b>

1 Staff on Fixed Term contract

2 DOE agency figures at 25 February 2009

3 Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division element of DSD casual staff at 20 January 2009

## Domestic Regional Rate

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much the freeze on the domestic regional rate will cost his Department, in each year between 2008 and 2011. (AQW 5690/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** If it is assumed that the domestic regional rate would have increased year on year in line with inflation at, say, 2.7%, this would result in a cost in the region of £7.2m for each year on a cumulative basis. Since revenue from regional rates is not linked to any particular spending programme, the reduction in revenue means that the Executive has less money available to allocate to all Departments.

## Events on the Grounds of Stormont Estate

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has received any requests for events to take place on the grounds of Stormont Estate between April and September 2009. (AQW 5741/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Yes, I have received a number of requests for events to take place on the grounds of Stormont Estate between April and September 2009.

### Councillor Info Project

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the success of the councillor.info project, and if further funding for this initiative will be made available by his Department. (AQW 5762/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Delivery Innovation Division (DID) within DFP financed a pilot project, councillor.info (www.councillor.info), through the former e-Government Fund. The e-Government fund was a direct result of the e-participation review carried out by OFMDFM in 2004/05. This review was carried out by the then Northern Ireland e Government Unit (NIeGU) now DID in DFP. As a result the e-Government fund sponsored several projects with one of the last of these being the councillor.info project. The aim of the pilot was to use modern technology to stimulate direct interaction between councillors and their electorate. The pilot project commenced in February 2008 and will run until the end of March 2009: a post project evaluation has yet to be completed.

Whilst experimental in nature, initial indications have shown that the project has been well received by a significant number of Councillors.

As a pilot project, my Department made it clear that it would only cover the first year costs and that funding thereafter would be the responsibility of individual Councils.

DFP has no resource to fund this project further.

#### STATISTICS

Council	No. signed up	No. not updated website	%	No. updated website	%	No. regularly updated	% of total	% of updated
Antrim	8	1	12.5	7	87.5	3	37.5	42.86
Ards	14	4	28.6	10	71.4	4	28.57	40
Armagh	7	1	14.3	6	85.7	5	71.43	83.33
Ballymena	4	1	25	3	75	2	50	66.67
Ballymoney	1	1	100	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	3	2	66.67	1	23.23	1	33.34	100
Belfast	12	3	25	9	75	3	25	33.34
Carrick	10	1	10	9	90	1	10	11.11
Castlereagh	11	1	9.09	10	90.91	4	36.36	40
Coleraine	9	2	22.22	7	77.78	5	55.56	71.43
Cookstown	5	1	20	4	80	3	60	75
Craigavon	8	4	50	4	50	1	12.5	25
Derry	16	3	18.75	13	81.25	3	18.75	23.08
Down	13	2	15.38	11	84.62	4	30.77	36.36
Dungannon	3	2	66.67	1	23.23	1	33.34	100
Fermanagh	10	4	40	6	60	2	20	33.34
Larne	5	0	0	5	100	0	0	0
Limavady	3	0	0	3	100	3	100	100
Lisburn	17	4	23.53	13	76.47	2	11.76	15.38
Magherafelt	2	0	0	2	100	0	0	0
Moyle	1	0	0	1	100	0	0	0
Newry and Mourne	13	4	30.77	9	69.23	3	23.08	33.34
Newtownabbey	9	2	22.22	7	77.78	1	11.11	14.29

Council	No. signed up	No. not updated website	%	No. updated website	%	No. regularly updated	% of total	% of updated
North Down	14	4	28.57	10	61.43	6	42.86	60
Omagh	19	7	36.84	12	63.16	6	31.58	50
Strabane	5	2	40	3	60	2	40	66.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>25.23</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>74.67</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>27.93</b>	<b>37.35</b>

- Regularly updated websites are defined by having at least 5 articles added since the project began.

## Civil Service

**Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnels to outline what steps they intend to take to ensure there is no conflict of interest issues when senior civil servants leave the NICS and take up senior positions in the private sector. (AQW 5781/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The procedures governing the acceptance of business appointments by civil servants are set out in paragraph 1.7.1 and Annex 4 of the Conduct section of the NICS Staff Handbook and they apply to the acceptance of appointments within business and other bodies.

The current rules require that within 2 years of leaving Civil Service employment, a civil servant is to obtain the approval of the former employing department before accepting any offer of employment.

The procedures require an individual to submit an application for approval that includes full details of the proposed appointment and details of any official dealings with the prospective employer, or knowledge which might give the prospective employer an advantage over competitors.

The rules were introduced to protect the NICS and individual members of staff from suspicion of impropriety in the event that they may wish to take up an appointment with an outside body on leaving the service. They allow for restrictions to be applied such as delaying acceptance of an appointment (a waiting period) or restrictions on the type of work which the individual may be involved with for a period of time. However, conditions such as these should, and are, only applied where there is a specific cause for concern such as the contact that the individual had with the company involved or its competitors during the course of their official duties.

## Senior Civil Servants

**Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for its assessment of senior Civil Servants joining the boards of banks that have close financial relationships with the public sector. (AQW 5838/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Business Appointments Rules governing the acceptance of appointments by civil servants are set out in the Conduct Section of the NICS Staff Handbook and they apply to the acceptance of appointments within business and other bodies.

These rules exist to counter suspicion that a serving civil servant might be influenced by the hope or expectation of future employment with a particular business or organisation; and to avoid the risk that a particular business or organisation might gain an unfair advantage over competitors by employing former civil servants. These rules are consistent with those applied in GB and are applied to all relevant appointments in Northern Ireland.

## Inspectors of Education

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to provide the number; and (ii) religious breakdown of Inspectors of Education in each Education and Library Board. (AQW 5879/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Inspectors of Education are members of the NI Civil Service and are employed by the Department of Education. The community background profile of this group is set out below:-

Protestant	Roman Catholic	Not Determined	Total
36	26	0	62

### Third Level Education College Staff

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if a business case for payment of arrears to third level education college staff has been submitted to his Department and if so, when agreement to the payment of arrears is expected. (AQW 5889/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** A business case has not been received in my Department in respect of a pay award for third level education college staff.

### Efficiency Savings

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the outcome of discussions were with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about efficiency savings. (AQW 5897/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** In the context of Budget 2008-2011 all departments were required to deliver 3% per annum efficiency savings. In bilateral discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, agreement was reached in relation to how the Minister's department would deliver the required target. Efficiency Delivery Plans, setting out the detail of these efficiency savings, are available on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's website, [www.detini.gov.uk](http://www.detini.gov.uk)

### Asymptomatic Plural Plaques

**Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to his answer to AQW 92/09, for an update on the consultation for compensation to people suffering from asymptomatic plural plaques. (AQW 5994/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** On 13 October 2008 my Department issued a consultation paper which explored the House of Lords' ruling in the Johnston case regarding asymptomatic pleural plaques and invited views on how people in Northern Ireland with pleural plaques could be supported and assisted. The consultation exercise concluded on 12 January 2009 and a preliminary analysis of the responses has been compiled. I am currently considering that analysis and will be assessing the available policy options with a view to determining the way forward.

### Civil Service

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he expects to commence the payments to Civil Service staff entitled to the equal pay claim. (AQW 6034/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Officials are currently in discussions with NIPSA about the equal pay issue facing the Northern Ireland Civil Service and a series of meetings are underway in order to establish the potential for an agreed settlement. As discussions with NIPSA have yet to be concluded and the equal pay claims already lodged are now the subject of legal processes in the Industrial Tribunal, you will appreciate that I am unable to provide any further specific details at present. The equal pay issues in the Civil Service are of a very significant scale and complexity and therefore it may yet take some time before I can confirm how they will be finally resolved.

### Drug Related Deaths

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people on prescription drugs have died as a result of addiction, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6059/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** In total 86 deaths were registered in Northern Ireland in 2007 where the cause of death was drug related<sup>1</sup>, either due to legal or illegal drugs, this compares to 91 deaths in 2006 and

84 deaths in 2005. It is not possible to ascertain whether the deceased was addicted to any drugs mentioned on the death certificate or if the deceased was receiving any prescription drugs.

- 1 - International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes:
- F11-F16, F18-F19 - Mental and behavioural disorders due to drug use (excluding alcohol and tobacco)
- X40-X44 - Accidental poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.
- X60-X64 - Intentional self-poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.
- X85 – Assault by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.
- Y10-Y14 - Poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances, undetermined intent.

### Drug Related Deaths

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide figures for those who have died from addiction to non-prescription drugs, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 6065/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** In total 86 deaths were registered in Northern Ireland in 2007 where the cause of death was drug related<sup>1</sup>, either due to legal or illegal drugs, this compares to 91 deaths in 2006 and 84 deaths in 2005. It is not possible to ascertain whether the deceased was addicted to any drugs mentioned on the death certificate.

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### Distribution of Department Publications

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6080/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** My Department adheres to the OFMDFM guidance on Distribution of Department Publications and Consultation Documents.

This guidance outlines that it is a matter of choice for recipients how they receive Government publications. The opportunity to receive publications by electronic means is available if requested.

### Civil Service

**Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why the required business case for pay increases for Civil Servants has not yet been approved. (AQW 6173/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Officials are currently in discussions with NIPSA about the equal pay issue facing the Northern Ireland Civil Service and a series of meetings are underway in order to establish the potential for an agreed settlement. As discussions with NIPSA have yet to be concluded and the equal pay claims already lodged are now the subject of legal processes in the Industrial Tribunal, you will appreciate that I am unable to provide any further specific details at present. The equal pay issues in the Civil Service are of a very significant scale and complexity and therefore it may yet take some time before I can confirm how they will be finally resolved.

### Civil Service

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on how and when the outstanding claims for Civil Service staff will be received. (AQW 6239/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Officials are currently in discussions with NIPSA about the equal pay issue facing the Northern Ireland Civil Service and a series of meetings are underway in order to establish the potential for an agreed settlement. As discussions with NIPSA have yet to be concluded and the equal pay claims already lodged are now the subject of legal processes in the Industrial Tribunal, you will appreciate that I am unable to provide any further specific details at present. The equal pay issues in the Civil Service are of a very significant scale and complexity and therefore it may yet take some time before I can confirm how they will be finally resolved.

## DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

### Muscular Skeletal Conditions

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what work his Department has undertaken on frameworks for muscular skeletal conditions. (AQW 5854/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey):** Work is ongoing to develop service frameworks for cardiovascular health and wellbeing; respiratory health and wellbeing; cancer prevention, treatment and care; mental health and wellbeing; learning disability; children and young people's health and wellbeing; and older people's health and wellbeing.

It is anticipated that additional priority areas for service framework development will be taken forward. These will be drawn from the remaining priorities identified and evaluated by the Department. These include musculoskeletal conditions, physical disability and sensory impairment, sexual health and diabetes.

### User Led Self Management

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department is doing to promote user led self management for long term conditions such as arthritis; and how his Department is engaging with the voluntary and community sectors on this. (AQW 5855/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The introduction of self management and patient education programmes is an essential element of my Department's approach to the more effective management of people with chronic conditions in the community. A wide range of self-management programmes is available. Some can be professionally-led and others can be delivered by patients or service users. It is a matter for HSC Boards working with healthcare professionals and voluntary organisations to decide on the most appropriate programmes to be delivered to individuals or to groups of people with long term conditions, including arthritis.

My officials met recently with the Long Term Conditions Alliance, which is an umbrella body representing a range of voluntary organisations including Arthritis Care, to discuss how voluntary organisations can contribute to the uptake of patient education and self-management programmes.

### Urology Treatment

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when East Antrim constituents will be able to receive urology treatment at Antrim Hospital and not have to travel at extra expense to Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. (AQW 5862/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A regional review of adult urology services in Northern Ireland is underway at present. The purpose of the review is to make recommendations for a model of service which will ensure quality urology services are provided in the right place, at the right time by the most appropriate clinician, through the entire care pathway from Primary Care to Intermediate to Secondary and Tertiary Care. Part of this work has also included a review of workforce planning and training / development needs of staff.

The Review Report will inform the future distribution of urology services across Northern Ireland, including the Northern Trust area, and is likely to be completed by the end of March.

The number of urology patients referred to other parts of the UK for treatment in the last 12 months is set out in the table below broken down by Health and Social Services Board of residence.

	No. of patients	Travel & accom. costs (patients) (£)	Treatment costs (£)	Cost for patient escorts (£)	Total cost (£)
NHSSB	11	6,265*	11, 086	-	17,351
EHSSB	24	13,392	60,000**	5,066	78,458
	118**	-	-	-	-
SHSSB	11	6,537*	58,685	-	65,222
WHSSB	9	3,013	8,284***	4,736	16,033
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>29,207</b>	<b>138,055</b>	<b>9,802</b>	<b>177,064</b>

**Source:** Health & Social Services Boards

**Notes:**

\* NHSSB & SHSSB unable to separate patient and escort travel and accommodation costs so this reflects the total for both

\*\* Reflects those patients referred to the Independent Sector as part of a waiting list initiative – costs have still to be finalised

\*\* This figure is an estimate based on an average cost of £2,500 per treatment as not all invoices have been received yet

\*\*\*This figure does not reflect the total patient treatment cost from the WHSSB area as not all invoices have been received yet.

## Urology Treatment

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when staffing infrastructure along with better training opportunities, will be put into place in hospitals to enable a more efficient urology service to be provided, minimising the need to send patients to other parts of the United Kingdom. (AQW 5863/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A regional review of adult urology services in Northern Ireland is underway at present. The purpose of the review is to make recommendations for a model of service which will ensure quality urology services are provided in the right place, at the right time by the most appropriate clinician, through the entire care pathway from Primary Care to Intermediate to Secondary and Tertiary Care. Part of this work has also included a review of workforce planning and training / development needs of staff.

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## Urology Treatment

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of vacancies in urology departments broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5864/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The number of current vacancies in urology departments is given by Trust in the table below. The Belfast, Northern and Western HSC Trusts have stated that they have no current vacancies.

Trust	Grade	Number of current vacancies in urology departments	
		Headcount	WTE
South Eastern	Ward Sister Band 6	1	1
Southern	Specialist Registrar	1	1
	Admin Band 2	3	2.01
	Admin Band 5 (Split post)	1	0.5

**Source:** Health & Social Care Trusts

**Notes:**

1. WTE = whole-time equivalent.
2. The Ward Sister Band 6 vacancy with in the South Eastern Trust is in a General Surgical ward, which includes Urology.
3. A current vacancy is defined as an unoccupied post which the organisation is actively trying to fill.

## Urology Treatment

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to patients receiving urology treatment in other parts of the UK, to detail (i) the number of patients; (ii) their travel costs; (iii) their treatment costs; and (iv) the travel and accommodation costs of friends and families, in the last 12 months. (AQW 5869/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A regional review of adult urology services in Northern Ireland is underway at present. The purpose of the review is to make recommendations for a model of service which will ensure quality urology services are provided in the right place, at the right time by the most appropriate clinician, through the entire care pathway from Primary Care to Intermediate to Secondary and Tertiary Care. Part of this work has also included a review of workforce planning and training / development needs of staff.

The Review Report will inform the future distribution of urology services across Northern Ireland, including the Northern Trust area, and is likely to be completed by the end of March.

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\*\*\*This figure does not reflect the total patient treatment cost from the WHSSB area as not all invoices have been received yet.

### **Ravara House Bangor**

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his meeting with Lady Hermon MP and myself at Ravara House will lead to a swift decision on the future of Ravara House Bangor.

(AQW 5880/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The South Eastern Trust's public consultation period on the proposals for the future of three statutory residential homes, including Ravara House, ended on 12th February 2009. The Trust will now consider the outcomes of the consultation before making a decision on the future of each of the homes. My Department will also monitor the responses to the consultation. Should the Trust's decision be to proceed with closure, I will make the final decision on the proposal. This process must be allowed to run its course without intervention.

If I am required to make a decision, before doing so, I will take account of the views expressed by all those who took part in the consultation process, and the needs of older people in the area now and in the future. I will also be concerned to take into account the position of the staff. But my primary consideration will be the health and well-being of the people who are currently resident in these Trust-run homes.

### **Residential Respite Care**

**Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many families with members who have autism qualify for residential respite care and how many are receiving their allocated quota, in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 5882/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As at, 10 March 2009, 40 families with members who have autism, within the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCCT) qualify for residential respite care. The Trust indicated they have no set quota for each family, though they operate a prescribed upper limit of six weeks per family.

### **Residential Respite Care**

**Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children and adults with challenging behaviour qualify for residential respite care in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 5883/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There are 44 adults and 4 children in the Western Health and Social Care Trust who exhibit challenging behaviours and would qualify for residential respite care.

### **Residential Respite Facilities**

**Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what residential respite facilities are available for children and adults with challenging behaviour, in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 5884/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Western Health and Social Care Trust offer residential respite facilities for children with challenging behaviour at Shepherds Way and Beltany House. Residential respite care for adults with challenging behaviour is provided at The Respite Cottages and Beltany House. Adults who have challenging behaviour which poses a potential danger to themselves or others, have on occasions received respite in Lakeview Hospital.

## Prescribed Medication

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has any plans to commission research into the level of addiction to prescribed medication. (AQW 5916/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Department is aware of the growing concern about the misuse of “prescription drugs”, and there is a range of survey work undertaken by the Department to uncover the level of use and misuse of prescription medication in Northern Ireland.

The Drug Addicts Index holds information on those whom “a doctor considers to be or has reasonable grounds to suspect is addicted to” a list of controlled drugs, some of which are prescribed drugs. The latest Drug Addict Index Annual Statistical bulletin was published on 5 March 2009.

Prevalence rates on the use of (though not addiction to) sedatives and tranquilisers and anti-depressants in Northern Ireland were previously published in Bulletin 1 (published in January 2008) of the 2006/2007 Drug Prevalence Survey. The relevant figures are set out in the table below:

	Anti-Depressants	Sedatives and Tranquillisers	Other Opiates
Lifetime use	21%	20%	20%
Last year use	9%	9%	8%
Last Month use	8%	7%	5%

Further details from the Survey can be found at:

<http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/first-results-200607-drug-prevalence-survey.pdf>

It should be noted that the next bulletin from the Drug Prevalence Survey is due to be published shortly and it will provide a more detailed analysis of data on the use of sedatives and tranquilisers and anti-depressants.

The Drug Misuse Database holds information on people presenting to treatment services with problem drug misuse. The annual statistical bulletin provides an analysis of the main drug of misuse of people presenting for treatment. Some of these drugs such as benzodiazepines, codeine and paracetamol, are prescribed medication. According to the most recent information (published in October 2008) benzodiazepines were the second most commonly reported main drug of misuse (reported by 31% of individuals), Codeine & paracetamol were reported as the main drug of misuse by just 2%. Again further information can be found at:

[http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/dmd\\_bulletin\\_2007-08.pdf](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/dmd_bulletin_2007-08.pdf)

With all this information it is not possible to establish if the drugs have been obtained on prescription by an individual or through another source.

The Department is beginning the process the review the ongoing implementation of the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD). As part of this work the Department will consider all relevant information, seek further research where necessary, to inform the ongoing development process, and decide if further action is required on specific issues, such as the misuse of prescription drugs.

## Nursing Staff

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been spent on recruiting temporary nursing staff through recruitment agencies in the last year, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5917/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not held centrally and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

## Auxiliary Staff

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been spent on recruiting temporary auxiliary staff through recruitment agencies in the last year, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 5918/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not held centrally and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

### Clostridium Difficile

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what costs have been incurred by the outbreak of Clostridium difficile in Craigavon Area Hospital through (i) the closure of beds; and (ii) longer inpatient stays. (AQW 5919/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** This information is not available.

### Alcoholic Drinks

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce (i) legislation which stops cut-price offers on alcoholic drinks; and (ii) a minimum price per alcoholic unit as proposed in Scotland. (AQW 5920/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Addressing alcohol misuse, particularly binge and young people's drinking, is a key priority for my Department. To this end, my Department has led in the development of a Young People's Drinking Action Plan that seeks to co-ordinate action to tackle this issue. This plan is currently with my Executive colleagues for consideration.

The Young People's Drinking Action Plan raises both the issues of cut-price offers on alcoholic drinks and minimum unit pricing, and these are areas which will need further consideration across the Executive as responsibility for these issues does not lie with my Department. There may also be issues in relation to EU Legislation and Competition Laws, and I will therefore be watching the developments in Scotland with great interest.

### Craigavon Area Hospital

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the occupancy rate of acute beds has been in Craigavon Area Hospital, over the past 12 months. (AQW 5922/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The number of available and occupied beds is collected on a quarterly basis, with the most recent being the quarter ending 31st December 2008. Occupancy rates are calculated from these data. The occupancy rate for acute beds in Craigavon Area Hospital, is shown in the table below, for each quarter and overall for the 12 months ending 31st December 2008.

Quarter Ending	Average Available Beds	Average Occupied Beds	Occupancy Rate
31-Mar-08	378.8	301.8	79.7%
30-Jun-08 <sup>(P)</sup>	394.1	319.3	81.0%
30-Sep-08 <sup>(P)</sup>	394.7	289.3	73.3%
31-Dec-08 <sup>(P)</sup>	397.8	304.6	76.6%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>391.4</b>	<b>303.7</b>	<b>77.6%</b>

Source: Departmental KH03a Return

(P) Data are provisional.

### Gynaecological Referrals

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the current average waiting time for urgent gynaecological referrals in the Southern Health and Social Services Trust area, and what measures are being taken to reduce the waiting time. (AQW 5925/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** All urgent "Red Flag" referrals to gynaecology are seen within a two week target. For other urgent referrals the Southern Trust aims for them to be seen within

4 weeks though there is clinical discretion to decide the level of urgency of individual cases. Routine referrals should be seen within the current target of 13 weeks the target for these appointments will reduce to 9 weeks from 1 April.

My Department continues to work towards reducing waiting times for all patients. Each Trust is currently working towards the targets that by March 2009, no patient should wait longer than 9 weeks for a first outpatient appointment, 9 weeks for a diagnostic test, and 13 weeks for inpatient or daycase treatment.

### Cervical Cancer Screening Tests

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there has been an increased uptake of cervical cancer screening tests in recent months following the publicity about Jade Goody.

(AQW 5928/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Data on cervical smear tests are not held centrally by the Department.

It is too early to state if there has been a significant increase in the uptake of cervical screening smear tests. Cervical screening laboratories have reported an increase in the number of smear tests taken over the past few months. It is not yet known if the increase comprises mainly women who already have regular smear tests attending for an earlier smear because of increased publicity or if it comprises a significant number of women who previously had not attended regularly or at all.

### Respite Care Provision

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of respite care provision in the North Down area.

(AQW 5932/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A range of respite services are available in the North Down area of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, including domiciliary supports, direct payments, provision of day care, community based inclusive activities and overnight respite in registered accommodation. Whilst my Department is currently undertaking work to provide a clearer and fuller picture of current and future respite provision and need, the Trust is taking a number of steps to address any gaps in respite provision including investing in additional respite beds in the non statutory sector, recruitment of specialist fostering placements, family support and domiciliary care inputs.

### Smoking-Related Illnesses

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with smoking-related illnesses over the last three years.

(AQW 5933/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information on the total number of persons that have been diagnosed with smoking-related diseases within the last three years is not available.

### Smoking-Related Illnesses

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of whether the general health of the public has improved since the banning of smoking in public places.

(AQW 5934/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Smoke-free legislation was introduced in April 2007 specifically to protect the public and employees from the harmful effects of tobacco smoke. I believe, as a result of this, the general health of our population will undoubtedly improve. Smoking related illnesses take many years to manifest in an individual; consequently the overall impact of smoke-free legislation on health improvement cannot be meaningfully measured within the short period since the introduction of the ban.

My department has undertaken research to determine changes in smoking trends and in second-hand smoke exposure following the introduction of smoke-free legislation. The results are very encouraging and show, for example, that smoking prevalence among adults fell from 25% in 2006/07 to 23% in 2007/08; that over 21,000

people set quit dates in 2007/08; and that three months after introduction of smoke-free legislation there was a 94% reduction in fine air particulates and a 92% reduction in air nicotine levels in sampled bars. The results of this preliminary research will be published shortly in "Smoke-free Legislation in Northern Ireland – A One Year Review."

### **Sudden Cardiac Deaths in Young People**

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the increasing number of sudden cardiac deaths in young people. (AQW 5939/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQO 2203/09.

### **Reducing Stress in the Workplace**

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety given that stress is the primary reason for absence from work, what action he intends to take to improve motivation and morale and reduce stress in the workplace. (AQW 5949/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Department recognises that stress related illnesses whether work related or not, can lead to long term absence from work. All stress related absences are investigated immediately and prompt action is taken to ensure staff receive the appropriate support. The measures currently in place to support staff who are suffering from a stress related illness are assistance from the Welfare Service and an employee assistance programme which is available 24/7 for both employees and immediate family members. If appropriate, an immediate referral to the Occupational Health Service can also be arranged.

The NICS Workplace Health Committee published a comprehensive booklet on Mental Wellbeing in 1999. This booklet provided advice and guidance to Departments and employees across the NICS on the commitment to Mental Wellbeing at work. The booklet, which was issued to every member of staff, was aimed at creating a much greater awareness about mental health at work and provided detailed guidance on tackling stress. This guidance is currently under review and a revised Mental Well-being policy will issue in due course.

Consideration is also 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 potential stress "hotspots"

### **Diabetes**

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children have been diagnosed with diabetes in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 5968/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information on the number of children diagnosed with diabetes each year is not available.

### **Rheumatoid Arthritis**

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has held with rheumatoid arthritis groups or organisations. (AQW 6009/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have not held any discussions with rheumatoid arthritis groups or organisations. However, my officials recently met a representative from the National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society to discuss services for people with rheumatoid arthritis.

### Rheumatoid Arthritis

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he plans to follow the lead in Wales and Scotland and implement the National Institute for Clinical Excellence guidance on rheumatoid arthritis medication and treatment. (AQW 6010/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Department has confirmed the application of three NICE technology appraisals for Northern Ireland in respect of biologic (anti-TNF) drugs for rheumatoid arthritis, subject to the conditions in the associated guidelines:

- TA 126 – recommending that abatacept is not used
- TA 130 – recommending that adalimumab, etanercept and infliximab are used subject to certain conditions
- TA 141 – recommending that Rituximab is used in certain circumstances.

Implementation is being taken forward in the context of the Public Service Agreement target to achieve a 21-week waiting time for drug therapies for treatment of severe arthritis by March 2011.

NICE has also recently published a clinical guideline on the management of rheumatoid arthritis in adults. This is currently being reviewed for its applicability to Northern Ireland and guidance on its implementation will be issued to the HSC.

### Rheumatoid Arthritis

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how long do patients with symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis spend on a waiting list to see a consultant, and how does this compare with other regions of the United Kingdom. (AQW 6011/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information on the number of patients with symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis waiting to see a consultant is not collected by the Department. Provision of such data by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland, and other health care providers in the rest of the United Kingdom, would incur a disproportionate cost.

### Health and Social Care Trusts

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total administrative costs broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, in the last financial year. (AQW 6028/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information is available on the payroll costs of administrative staff for the financial year 2007/08:

Trust	£
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	80,067,393
Northern Health and Social Care Trust	49,457,422
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust	32,891,414
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	35,855,154
Western Health and Social Care Trust	33,267,611
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service	1,589,166

The above figures are taken from a direct download of the payroll system for each Trust.

Some 1700 administration job reductions are anticipated across the Health Service as a result of the Review of Public Administration and it is estimated that around 1000 of these have been achieved since April 2007.

### Craigavon Area Hospital

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is a new outbreak of a vomiting bug in Craigavon Area Hospital, and if so, (i) which wards are affected; and (ii) how it is being addressed. (AQW 6032/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have been advised that there is no new outbreak of a vomiting bug at Craigavon Area Hospital.

### Speech, Language and Communications Problems

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children are receiving help with (i) speech; (ii) language; and (iii) communication problems, in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 6035/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information is not available in the format requested.

### Accident and Emergency Departments

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times patients were transferred, in an emergency, to hospitals in vehicles other than emergency ambulances, over the past five years, by accident and emergency department. (AQW 6036/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** This information is currently unavailable.

### People with Learning Disabilities

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the budget for; and (ii) how the budget is spent on, people with learning disabilities, in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 6042/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The table below shows how the £197m budget was planned to be spent on Learning Disability Services in 2008/09 across the five Health and Social Care Trusts. The pattern of expenditure is based on Trusts local knowledge and their understanding of the demand for services in their area. Belfast Trust accounts for a substantial amount of hospital care due to the regional services they provide.

	Belfast (£m)	Northern (£m)	Southern (£m)	South Eastern (£m)	Western (£m)	Total (£m)
Allied Health Professionals	1.3	2.4	2.5	1.0	0.5	7.7
Daycare (Social Services Attendances)	6.7	8.3	8.1	6.9	7.4	37.4
Learning Disability Nurses	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.8	1.0	4.3
Domiciliary Care	3.4	1.3	2.7	1.4	1.9	10.7
Hospital Care	23.1	0.2	8.5	0.0	3.7	35.5
Nursing & Residential Care	13.3	15.2	12.1	14.1	9.1	63.8
Social Work	2.0	3.0	2.3	1.3	2.1	10.7
Other Community Services	0.3	2.3	2.5	4.2	1.1	10.4
Other PSS	2.7	5.6	3.4	1.8	3.0	16.5
<b>Total Trust Expenditure</b>	<b>53.6</b>	<b>39.1</b>	<b>43.0</b>	<b>31.5</b>	<b>29.8</b>	<b>197.0</b>

**Source:** SRF 2008/09. Figures may not total due to rounding

### Care for the Elderly

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the budget for; and (ii) how the budget is spent on, 'care for the elderly', in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 6043/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The table below shows that Health and Social Care Trusts planned to spend £576.2m on Programme of Care 4, Elderly Care in 2008/09. Of this 37.4% was to be spent on Residential and Nursing Home Care.

	Belfast (£m)	Northern (£m)	Southern (£m)	South Eastern (£m)	Western (£m)	Total (£m)
Aids and Adaptations	0.6	2.6	0.6	0.7	1.2	5.6
Allied Health Professionals	4.7	4.8	4.8	2.6	2.5	19.4
Daycare (Social Services Attendances)	4.1	2.5	2.9	1.4	2.0	12.9
District Nursing	8.5	7.4	7.3	6.4	5.0	34.5
Domiciliary Care	27.8	29.3	20.5	22.3	16.2	116.1
Geriatric Medicine	23.5	12.0	17.0	15.9	14.8	83.1
Nursing & Residential Home Care	50.3	51.5	38.0	44.3	31.7	215.8
Old Age Psychiatry	3.6	7.6	5.8	3.3	6.4	26.7
Social Work	6.6	6.4	4.0	2.8	6.0	25.8
Other Community Services	8.2	7.4	4.2	2.8	3.0	25.7
Other PSS	2.9	0.7	0.2	4.1	2.7	10.7
<b>Total Trust Expenditure</b>	<b>140.9</b>	<b>132.1</b>	<b>105.3</b>	<b>106.6</b>	<b>91.4</b>	<b>576.2</b>

**Source:** SRF 2008/09. Figures may not total due to rounding and do not include any services delivered to those aged 65 + in Acute Hospital Services, Mental Health, Learning Disabled or Physical & Sensory Disabled Programmes of Care.

### Diabetes

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children have been diagnosed with diabetes, broken down by constituency, in the last year. (AQW 6063/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information on the number of children diagnosed with diabetes in the last year is not available.

### Prescription Drugs

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people on prescription drugs have addiction problems, and have attended the addiction clinic, in each the last 3 years. (AQW 6066/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information in the form requested is not available.

### Lough Cuan House Residential Home

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, now that the South Eastern Health and Social Services Trust consultation process has concluded, will he visit Lough Cuan House Residential Home at the earliest convenient time. (AQW 6113/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have recently visited a number of the statutory residential homes, across the various Trust regions, which have been subject to the reform and modernisation proposals and it is my intention to visit Loch Cuan in Newtownards when my diary permits.

## Termination of Pregnancy Guidelines

**Ms Purvis** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he will publish the guidelines on the termination of pregnancy, which were recently passed by the Executive. (AQW 6165/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department will issue Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy shortly.

## DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Traffic Calming Measures

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Regional Development what traffic calming measures are in place in the vicinity of schools in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 5777/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy):** My Department's Roads Service has developed its Safer Routes to Schools programme, with the aim of tackling the problems caused by the continuing growth of the use of cars, for the 'School Run'. It is anticipated that this will be achieved, by raising the awareness of the major issues related to increased congestion, including the detrimental impact on road safety, health and the environment. In addition, the programme aims to provide measures to encourage increased use of sustainable travel options for the school journey, such as walking, cycling, public transport and car sharing.

Where appropriate, the Safer Routes to School programme provides traffic management improvements outside schools, as well as curriculum based education and awareness resources, travel surveys, information leaflets, road safety training and initiatives, to encourage a modal shift away from the car, for the school run.

The table below includes the traffic management improvements which have been provided at schools within the Lagan Valley constituency:

School Name	Address	Measures Provided
Moira Primary School	Backwood Road, Moira	Flashing school signs, red surfacing.
Derriaghy Primary School	Derriaghy Road, Derriaghy	Flashing school signs, red surfacing.
Ballymacward Primary School	Rock Road, Stoneyford	Flashing school signs, red surfacing.
Carr Primary School	Hillsborough Road, Carryduff	Flashing school signs, red surfacing.
Ballinderry Primary School	Crumlin Road, Lower Ballinderry	Flashing school signs, red surfacing.
Maghaberry Primary School	Maghaberry Road, Maghaberry	Flashing school signs, red surfacing.
St Patricks High School	Ballinderry Road, Lisburn	Flashing school signs, red surfacing.
St Aloysius Primary School	Ballinderry Road, Lisburn	Flashing school signs, red surfacing.
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	The Cutts, Derriaghy	Flashing school signs, red surfacing with 'School Safety Zone' worded markings.
The Wallace High School	Clonevin Park, Lisburn	Flashing school signs, red surfacing with 'School Safety Zone' worded markings.
Friends School	Magheralave Road, Lisburn	Flashing school signs, red surfacing with 'School Safety Zone' worded markings.

### Park and Ride Facilities

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Regional Development what park and ride facilities are currently operational in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 5778/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Within the Lagan Valley constituency there are two park and ride facilities provided in connection with rail travel. These are located at Lisburn train station and at the Moira rail halt.

In addition, there are two bus-based park and ride facilities on the M1 corridor at Sprucefield and at Blacks Road. These were implemented as part of the traffic management measures, during the M1/Westlink project construction period.

### Ten-Day Payment Target

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much of the total amount due to suppliers was paid within the ten-day payment target, in the last year. (AQW 5822/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In the period 1 March 2008 to 28 February 2009, the Department for Regional Development made payment to suppliers totalling £260.3 million. Of this amount, £157.2 million (60.4%) was paid within ten working days.

### Park and Ride Facilities

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what park and ride facilities are operational in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5830/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Within the North Down constituency there are currently four park and ride facilities provided in connection with rail travel. These are located at Bangor, Holywood, Helens Bay and Carnlea rail stations and provide, in total, approximately 180 parking spaces.

### Traffic Calming Measures

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what additional traffic calming measures are to be introduced in the vicinity of schools in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5831/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In my reply to the Member's recent Assembly Question, AQW 1968/09, I advised that my Department's Roads Service is committed to installing road safety facilities outside schools, as part of the Travelwise Safer Routes to Schools initiative, and of the type of measures involved.

I would also refer the Member to my recent reply to his Assembly Question, AQW 5832/09, in which I provided details of traffic management improvements which have been provided at schools within the North Down constituency.

The Programme of Work for the 2009/10 financial year has not yet been set. I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager to write to you, when the programme has been confirmed early in the new financial year.

### Traffic Calming Measures

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what traffic calming measures are in place in the vicinity of schools in the North Down constituency. (AQW 5832/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has developed its Safer Routes to Schools programme, with the aim of tackling the problems caused by the continuing growth of the use of cars, for the 'school run'. It is anticipated that this will be achieved by raising the awareness of the major issues related to increased congestion, including the detrimental impact on road safety, health and the environment. In addition, the programme aims to provide measures to encourage increased use of sustainable travel options for the school journey, such as walking, cycling, public transport and car sharing.

Where appropriate, the Safer Routes to School programme provides traffic management improvements outside schools, as well as curriculum based education and awareness resources, travel surveys, information leaflets, road safety training and initiatives, to encourage a modal shift away from the car, for the school run.

The table below includes the traffic management improvements which have been provided at schools within the North Down constituency:

School Name	Address	Measures Provided
Glengola Collegiate School	Bloomfield Road, Bangor	Flashing school signs
Redburn Primary School	Old Holywood Road, Holywood	Flashing school signs
St Comgalls Primary School	Brunswick Road, Bangor	Flashing school signs
Sullivan Upper School	Belfast Road and Abbey Road, Holywood	Flashing school signs
St Malachy's Primary School	Clandeboyne Road, Bangor	Flashing school signs
Clandeboyne Primary School	Clandeboyne Road, Bangor	Flashing school signs

### Knockmore Railway Line

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money was spent maintaining the Knockmore railway line in 2008. (AQW 5850/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Translink have advised me that the running cost of maintaining the Knockmore railway line in 2008 was £91,610, including gross depreciation of £54,477.

### Knockmore Railway Line

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide the (i) total number and (ii) types of trains that used the Knockmore railway line in 2008. (AQW 5852/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Translink have advised me that during the calendar year 2008 a total of two trains used the Knockmore railway line. Details are:

- Train 1 September 2008, MRSI Charter, Class 80, Lisburn-Antrim return;
- Train 2 December 2008, ballast train, GM 112 and wagons.

### Reducing Stress in the Workplace

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development given that stress is the primary reason for absence from work, what action he intends to take to improve motivation and morale and reduce stress in the workplace. (AQW 5953/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** DRD already has in place a number of support mechanisms and initiatives, some of which are operated across all Departments, to improve staff motivation, morale and help reduce stress in the workplace. These include:

- Our Stress Management Policy, under which staff and line managers are given advice and guidance to help them recognise the symptoms of stress and how this condition can be managed;
- Attendance management procedures which fast-track stress-related absence cases to the Occupational Health Service to provide specific advice and information to the members of staff involved;
- Our Dignity at Work and Health and Safety policies, which provide staff with the means to tackle unacceptable behaviour and ensure healthy working practices;
- Work/Life Balance arrangements, including part-time working, job-sharing, flexible working hours, maternity and paternity leave, career break facilities and a Departmental Teleworking scheme, all of which are available to assist staff to manage their work and domestic responsibilities;
- Ongoing health checks, organised in conjunction with the Occupational Health Service, are offered to all staff;
- Regular Health Promotion events which focus on a number of health-related issues, including the recognition, control and relief of stress;

- We enable access by all staff to the Occupational Health Service and the Civil Service-wide Welfare Support Service; and
- We participate in the NI Civil Service Employee Assistance Programme, which provides a free, confidential 24-hour independent counselling service for all staff.

In addition to these measures, the Departmental Board initiated, in 2008, a “DRD Change and Improvement Programme” which focuses on improving corporate leadership and communications, enabling people, improving governance, and partnership working. The aim is to help develop capable, committed and confident staff to help the Department to deliver its services and to achieve its business objectives. The views of staff, assessed through focus groups, have helped to shape the programme. The improvements already achieved and those planned for the future in communications, leadership, training, financial management and partnership working are expected to make a major contribution towards improving staff morale and motivation.

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Regional Development at what stage is the review of pay and grading for employees of Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 5959/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the review of pay and grading is subject to ongoing negotiations with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA). While many issues have been agreed with the trade union, some relating to implementation and assimilation arrangements remain to be resolved. During December 2008, NIW employees were provided with details of the proposed pay structures and pay progression arrangements which had been agreed with NIPSA.

### Transferring Budgets

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Regional Development if it is possible to transfer monies from one section of his Department to another, at the end of each financial year. (AQW 5970/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The February Monitoring Round is the last opportunity for the Department to seek Executive approval to transfer budgets from one business area to another.

### Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all work being carried out by the Roads Service and NI Water in the South Antrim constituency in March 2009. (AQW 5983/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department’s Roads Service has advised that in addition to the ongoing M2 Improvements Scheme, between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions, the following work will be undertaken in the South Antrim Constituency during March 2009:

- work to assist right turns - Antrim Road, between Sandyknowes and Chimney Corner Hotel;
- replacement of traffic signs - Sandyknowes Junction;
- carriageway resurfacing – Kilbride Road, Doagh;
- add Remote Monitoring Systems to three pelican crossings – Main Street, Ballyclare and Ballyclare Square East and West;
- planned works in relation to Ballyclare Environmental Improvement Scheme;
- carriageway resurfacing - A2 Larne Road, Eden Village;
- carriageway resurfacing - A2 Larne Road, Tongue Lonan Road and Rawbrae Road;
- upgrade of storm water drainage system - Straid Village;
- provision of new storm water drainage - Dalways Bawn, Ballycarry;
- provision of road humps - Hawthorne Road, Newtownabbey;
- new footway (including new storm sewer and watermain on behalf of NI Water)- Park Road, Mallusk;
- carriageway resurfacing - Roguery Road, between its junction with Ballydonnelly Road and 156 Roguery Road;

- carriageway resurfacing - Coolsythe Road, between Portglenone Road and Ahoghill Road;
- carriageway resurfacing - Rickamore Brae, between Ballyrobin Road and Rickamore Road Upper;
- footway and carriageway resurfacing - Castleton, Templepatrick;
- carriageway resurfacing - Ballyquillan Road;
- improvements to the bus stop and associated footway links - junction of Ballyquillan Road and Diamond Road.

Routine maintenance work, which will also be carried out on roads in the South Antrim constituency during March 2009, includes:

- gully and manhole cleaning;
- sweeping and litter picking; and
- emergency telephone and communication cabinet cleaning.
- Northern Ireland Water has advised of the following work to be carried out in the South Antrim constituency during March 2009.
- replacement watermain- Birchill Road, Antrim;
- rehabilitation work - Rashee Service Reservoir;
- enhanced security and telemetry work – reservoirs at Newtownabbey and Antrim;
- replacement of joints - Hyde Park Service Reservoir;
- rehabilitation work - Ballyvaston Service Reservoir;
- foul sewer upgrade - Aldergrove Sewerage Scheme, Antrim Road;
- installation of storm tank - Roughfort Waste Water Treatment Works;
- upgrade of existing works Milltown Waste Water Treatment Works, Antrim; and
- installation of gravity sewer, pumping main and two pumping stations - Creevery Sewerage Scheme Phase II.

These are in addition to the day-to-day maintenance and repair work required to the water and sewage network.

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answers to AQW 914/09 and AQW 2039/09, in relation to the review of pay and grading arrangements for employees of Northern Ireland Water, (i) has this process been completed; (ii) if Northern Ireland Water and the unions have resolved all issues; and (iii) if employees have to make decisions about their pensions without knowing if a deal has been agreed between Northern Ireland Water and the unions (AQW 6030/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the review of pay and grading is subject to ongoing negotiations with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA). While many issues have been agreed with the trade union, some relating to implementation and assimilation arrangements are yet to be resolved.

Employees were provided with details of the proposed pay structures and pay progression arrangements during December 2008 and NIW is satisfied that this provided sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision about their pensions before the 3 February 2009 deadline for the pensions option exercise.

### Road Maintenance

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department has spent on road maintenance (i) in total; and (ii) by mile, for each class of road, in the North Antrim constituency, over the past three years. (AQW 6041/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service does not maintain the information requested on a constituency basis. I can also advise that Roads Service's expenditure is not recorded by class of road.

However, Roads Service does record the actual spend during the preceding financial year, and a breakdown of the number of miles of road managed, for each Council area.

The total amount spent by Roads Service across the North, on structural maintenance, in each of the last three years, is as follows:-

2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
£70.5 million	£65.6 million	£77.3 million

Structural maintenance includes resurfacing, strengthening, surface dressing, patching and structural drainage.

The table below provides details of spend on structural maintenance, together with the number of miles managed, and the approximate spend per mile that this equates to, for the Councils in the North Antrim Constituency, in each of the last three years.

District	Road Length (miles)*	Spend 05-06		Spend 06-07		Spend 07-08	
		£	£/mile**	£	£/mile**	£	£/mile**
Ballymena	617	3,354,000	5,000	2,471,000	4,000	2,749,000	4,000
Ballymoney	349	1,527,000	4,000	1,433,000	4,000	1,648,000	5,000
Moyle	325	1,301,000	4,000	1,187,000	4,000	1,340,000	4,000

\* Road lengths are route miles as at 1 April 2007 and exclude motorway slip roads.

\*\* Figures of £/mile have been rounded to nearest £k.

## Footpath Provision

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria is applied by Roads Service for footpath provision in proposed residential developments for which planning approval is sought. (AQW 6067/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service is consulted by Planning Service to provide advice on roads matters for housing development proposals, including with regard to the provision of footpaths within any such proposal.

Proposals are considered against the joint DOE/DRD planning guide, 'Creating Places'. This incorporates guidance on layout and access for residential developments. Roads Service would normally stipulate that footpaths should be provided along both sides of a carriageway, except where development is only on one side of the carriageway. However, footways may be omitted to create a shared surface, where development is on both sides of a carriageway and the carriageway serves no more than approximately 25 dwellings.

## Welcome Signs to Villages

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what rules apply for the erection of welcome signs to villages by community groups. (AQW 6070/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has an agreed policy in place with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the local Councils, to cover the provision of town and village welcome signs. This policy permits the erection of welcome signs, other than the standard black on white plates, providing that certain conditions are met, including that:

- the sign design must comply with that currently authorised by my Department;
- the content of the sign must be agreed with the local Council;
- the sign should generally be erected on the main approaches to the town or village, in the vicinity of existing 30mph or 40mph limit signs; and
- the promoter should pay for the signs.

### Fuel Efficiency of New Buses

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the fuel efficiency of new buses operated by Translink. (AQW 6076/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Translink has informed me that, although recently purchased buses produce fewer emissions, they are less fuel efficient than traditional vehicles. This reduction in fuel efficiency is in part due to the extra weight associated with making new buses accessible to people with disabilities and improving passenger comfort and safety.

However, it is likely that fuel efficiency of new buses will improve with the introduction of more sophisticated electronic control of engines and transmissions.

Translink continues to examine ways of improving fuel consumption through initiatives such as automatic gear change programmes and idle-shut down devices.

### Site Meeting at the Hillhead Road, Newry

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development on what date did he attend a site meeting at the Hillhead Road, Newry. (AQW 6084/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member will be aware I met on site with him, Mr Michael Brady MLA and a number of local residents on 9 July 2007, to discuss the on-going closure of the Hillhead Road, Newry.

### Road Maintenance

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount spent on Road Structural Maintenance for the years (i) 2002-03; (ii) 2003-04; (iii) 2004-05; (iv) 2005-06; (v) 2006-07; (vi) 2007-08; and (vii) 2008-09. (AQW 6103/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Departments Roads Service has advised that the total spend on structural maintenance over the years 2002/2003–2008/2009 is as follows:-

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
£67.1 million	£82.8 million	£73.8 million	£70.5 million	£65.6 million	£77.3 million	£59 million*

\* figure is estimated end of year spend.

Structural maintenance includes resurfacing, strengthening, surface dressing, patching and structural drainage.

### Translink

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5708/09, to extend the purchase of return tickets to Half Price Smart Pass holders on all Translink services. (AQW 6119/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** From 1 April 2009, half fare SmartPass holders will be able to purchase return tickets for rail travel. This facility is being introduced to remove the need for pass holders to make two separate visits to the ticket office for each leg of their journey. On bus journeys, passengers must pass the driver as they board the vehicle and I do not consider that any real benefit would be achieved by having return tickets made available. As such, there are no plans to change the current arrangements for buying half fare bus tickets.

### Traffic Calming Measures

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister for Regional Development for a list of traffic calming measures in Upper Bann. (AQW 6147/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I understand the Upper Bann constituency covers areas from both Craigavon and Banbridge Councils. My Department's Roads Service has advised that during the last four financial years there have been 34 traffic calming schemes, as well as 17 school travel and safety projects, implemented within these Council areas.

The tables below provide details of the traffic calming schemes and the school travel and safety projects in Upper Bann:

**TRAFFIC CALMING SCHEMES**

Council area	Year	Location	Features
Craigavon	2005/06	Ashgrove Road, Portadown	Traffic islands, central hatching and gateway feature
		Sloan St, Lurgan	Traffic islands, right-turn lanes and central hatching
		Hill St, Lurgan	Road markings and sheltered parking
		Gilford Rd, Portadown	Junction improvements and right-turn markings
		Churchill / Woodside estate, Portadown	Speed ramps
		Scotch Street	Gateway features, central hatching, right-turn lanes and road markings
		Lake Street, Lurgan	Gateway feature, central hatching, pedestrian islands and mini-roundabouts
	2006/07	Dumnacanvey village	Gateway features and road markings
		Meadowbrook estate, Craigavon	Speed ramps and tables
		Waringstown	Gateway features, build-outs and sheltered parking
	2007/08	Kernan Rd, Portadown	Gateway and central hatching
		Gibsons Hill	Gateways and central hatching
		Mourne Rd, Lurgan	Speed ramps
		Tullygally Road, Craigavon	Traffic islands and central hatching
Craigavon	2008/09	Brownlow Road, Craigavon	Traffic islands and central hatching
		Bachelors Walk, Portadown	Road humps and speed cushions
		Cecil Street Area, Portadown	Road humps

Council area	Year	Location	Features
Banbridge	2005/06	Hillsborough Rd, Dromore	Gateway features, central hatching, right-turn lanes and road markings
		Gallows St (upper) & Jubilee Rd, Dromore	Gateway features, kerb build-outs and road markings
		Meeting St, Dromore	New signs, anti-skid surfacing and sheltered parking
		Huntly Rd, Banbridge	Central hatching, traffic islands, right-turning lanes and mini-roundabout
		Peggy's Loanin, Banbridge	Central hatching and right-turn lanes
		Newry Rd, Banbridge	Sheltered parking, central hatching and pedestrian islands
	2006/07	Moneyslane village	Gateway features and road markings
		Scarva St, Banbridge	Kerb build-outs, sheltered parking and road markings
		Lawrencetown village	Gateway features, road markings and short length of footpath
	2007/08	Fort St, Banbridge	Gateway, central hatching, traffic islands, mini-roundabout and speed ramps
		Hilltown Rd, Rathfriland	Gateway and traffic island
		Castlevew, Gilford	Speed ramps
		Waringsford Village	Mini-roundabout and gateway features.
	2008/09	Commercial Road Banbridge	Road hump, speed cushions, build-outs, sheltered parking and central hatching.
		Dromore St/Rd, Banbridge	Traffic islands, build-outs, central hatching and gateway feature.
		Pound Hill/Diamond Road, Dromore	Road humps, speed table and gateway feature.
		Donard View, Loughbrickland	Speed cushions and road humps

## SAFER ROUTES TO SCHOOL SCHEMES

Council area	Year	Location	Features
Craigavon	2005/06	Bocombra Primary School, Portadown	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2005/06	Richmount Primary School, Scotch Street, Portadown	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2006/07	King's Park Primary School, Lurgan	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2006/07	St. Teresa's Primary School, Lurgan	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2007/08	St. Mary's Primary School, Derrytrasna	Flashing signs, enhanced road markings, footway and site line improvements
	2007/08	St. Mary's Primary School, Gawley's Gate	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2007/08	St. Francis Primary School, Lurgan	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2007/08	St. Paul's Junior High School, Lurgan	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2008/09	Brownlow Integrated College, Craigavon	School safety zone including flashing signs, enhanced road markings, road humps, priority build out and pedestrian islands

Council area	Year	Location	Features
Banbridge	2005/06	Moyallon Primary School, Portadown	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2006/07	Bridge Integrated Primary School, Banbridge	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2006/07	Ballydown Primary School, Banbridge	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2007/08	St. Colman's Primary School, Lawrencetown	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2007/08	St. Colman's Primary School, Annaclone	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2007/08	Bronte Primary School, Banbridge	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings
	2008/09	Rathfriland High School, Rathfriland	Flashing signs and enhanced road markings

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what problems have been encountered in agreeing the pay and grading system for Northern Ireland Water that was due to be completed by the end of November 2008; and if he is aware that employees have had to take other decisions about pensions without having this resolved. (AQW 6188/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the review of pay and grading is subject to ongoing negotiations with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA). While many issues have been agreed with the trade union, some relating to implementation and assimilation arrangements are yet to be resolved.

Employees were provided with details of the proposed pay structures and pay progression arrangements during December 2008 and NIW is satisfied that this provided sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision about their pensions before the 3 February 2009 deadline for the pensions option exercise.

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain the comment from Northern Ireland Water that it 'invests £1m every working day'; including where this money goes; and what benefits are received by the consumer. (AQW 6268/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that its current Strategic Business Plan includes £667 million for capital works investment across the three years to 2010 which equates to around £1 million per working day. This major investment is aimed at improving the water and sewerage infrastructure to achieve compliance with European Union water quality and environmental standards and will provide maximum benefit for customers including enhanced drinking water quality, improved delivery of services, greater protection of the environment and public health.

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) what proposals or plans develop or dispose of existing or new sites for NI Water; (ii) to detail any construction projects planned to be underway for NI Water for each of the next 3 years broken down by year; and (ii) to outline how any such estate development strategy complies with the Bain report proposals on the location of public sector employment. (AQW 6310/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has no proposals to develop any of its sites for office accommodation and therefore has no construction projects planned during the next three years for this purpose. It plans to dispose of approximately 118 sites identified as no longer required, including pieces of land, former works and pumping stations and a former depot.

The detailed suggestions contained in the Bain report on the review of policy on the location of public sector jobs are subject to careful examination and consideration by the Executive before decisions will be taken on a way forward. NIW has no objection to the principle of relocation provided it is based on sound business needs and offers best value for money.

## Departmental Accounts

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to outline the process by which his Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits his Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail his Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6348/09)

### The Minister for Regional Development:

- (i) DRD's Resource Accounts are audited under the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, and in accordance with United Kingdom Auditing Standards, as issued by the Auditing Practices Board.
- (ii) The accounts are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office.
- (iii) The Departments final audited accounts have been published and are available in the Assembly Library. They can also be accessed from the DRD website.

## DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Capital Infrastructure Projects

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to capital infrastructure projects in the East Londonderry constituency, (i) to list all these projects; and (ii) to breakdown the aggregated value of each project that is (a) under construction; (ii) in the procurement process; or (iii) to be advertised, in financial year 2009/2010. (AQW 6208/09)

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie):** The information on capital infrastructure projects in my Department relevant to the Member's East Londonderry constituency is set out in the table below.

Project name	Status : under construction / to be procured or to be advertised	Value £m
Greysteel Phase 2, Limavady	Under construction	1.2

The member may wish to note that the Public Realm scheme covering the pedestrianised town centre in Coleraine is scheduled to complete by the end of March 2009. The estimated total cost of this is £1.32m, with the DSD contribution being some £1.23m.

## NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

### Assembly Shop

**Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission (i) from which local companies is merchandise purchased for the Assembly shop; (ii) in which constituency is each of these companies based; and (iii) what merchandise does the Assembly shop stock. (AQW 5958/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** The attached table sets out (i) local companies from which the Assembly purchase merchandise for the Assembly Gift Shop, (ii) the constituency in which each company is based and (iii) a list of merchandise which the Assembly Gift Shop stocks.

In addition to the attached list a number of local crafters from across Northern Ireland have been provided with the opportunity to promote their goods in the Assembly Gift Shop each month. For the purpose of the crafter initiative the Assembly do not purchase any merchandise from the local crafters.

From which local companies is merchandise purchased	Constituency companies based	What merchandise does the Assembly shop stock?
Belleek Pottery	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Belleek China
Bog Standard	Belfast East	Candles/Soaps
Celebration Candles	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Candles
Impress Business Gifts	North Antrim	Whiskey glasses/Folders
McCaw Allen	Upper Bann	Linen/Cups/Soaps
Riverside Cards	West Tyrone	Greeting Cards
The Postcard Company	West Tyrone	Greeting Cards
Tyrone Crystal	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Crystal
Cornucopia4u	South Antrim	Jewellery
O'Donnell Press	South Antrim	Children's Books
Graces Irish Biscuits	Belfast East	Biscuits
NI Gifts	Belfast South	Postcards/Posters/Key-rings
Berryhill Merchants	Newry & Armagh	Sweets
Lighthouse Drawing Room	Belfast South	Christmas Cards
Simply Special	West Tyrone	Greeting Cards
Miniprint Printers	Belfast East	Puzzles/loopy key-rings/Highlighters/Golf Tees/Pens
J Dougherty & Sons	North Antrim	Tights
Ulster Architectural Heritage Society	Belfast South	Parliament Buildings Books
Boleynowe China	South Antrim	Stormont t Thimbles/Butter dishes.

### Art Owned by the Assembly

**Mr McNarry** asked the Assembly Commission what is the (i) estimated value; and (ii) insured value of art owned by the Assembly that are not registered under the Government Art Collection. (AQW 5995/09)

#### The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):

- (i) In August 2007, the Assembly Commission arranged to have a valuation of all artefacts, including artwork, belonging to the Northern Ireland Assembly carried out. A copy of the valuation is enclosed.
- (ii) The artefacts belonging to the Northern Ireland Assembly, including the artwork, are not currently insured. The Assembly previously took the decision not to insure these items and to carry the risk. The Assembly currently has several works of art on loan from the Government Art Collection however these are managed centrally through the Department of Finance and Personnel, DFP. In line with other Government Departments DFP do not carry commercial insurance, they carry the risk and indemnify themselves against possible claims.

#### Valuation at Current Auction Estimates

- 1 **FRANK McKELVEY RHA**  
Portrait of Rt Hon J M Andrews in uniform  
signed lower right  
oil on canvas  
40in.x33in. 3,500-4,500
- 2 **N BECHER**  
Portrait of Lord Craigavon  
signed lower right and dated 1932  
oil on canvas  
48in.x32in 10,000-15,000

- |    |  |                 |
|----|--|-----------------|
| 3  | <b>HENRY W GATES</b><br>Portrait of Sir Henry Wilson<br>signed lower right<br>oil on canvas<br>30in.x23½in   | 4,000-5,000     |
| 4  | <b>HUGH G RIVIERE</b><br>Portrait of John B Lonsdale, Lord Armaghdale<br>signed top left and dated 1908<br>oil on canvas<br>42in.x33½in  | 6,000-8,000     |
| 5  | <b>CHARLES SNEED WILLIAMS</b><br>Portrait of a Frederick Temple, Third Marquess of Dufferin and Ava,<br>Speaker of the Senate of Northern Ireland 1921-1930 in a wig and gown,<br>half length, seated on a chair.<br>Crest in top right corner.<br>oil on canvas<br>51in.x39in | 5,000-7,000     |
| 6  | <b>LYDIA DE BURGH</b><br>Her Majesty the Queen<br>Signed and dated lower left<br>Oil on canvas<br>27in.x23in   | 10,000-15,000   |
| 7  | <b>WILLIAM CONOR</b><br>Sketch for the State Opening of Parliament<br>signed top left and dated 1921<br>oil on canvas<br>24½in.x29½in  | 25,000-35,000   |
| 8  | <b>WILLIAM CONOR</b><br>The State Opening of Parliament<br>signed top left and dated 1931<br>oil on canvas<br>30in.x56in   | 50,000-70,000   |
| 9  | <b>PIETER VAN DER MEULEN</b><br>William III, the Duke of Schomberg<br>receiving the Pope's blessing<br>oil on canvas (relined and restored)<br>62in.x87in  | 100,000-200,000 |
| 10 | <b>JOSEPH TUDOR</b><br>The Obelisk on the Boyne<br>signed<br>oil on canvas<br>40in.x50in   | 300,000-400,000 |

**Remaining pictures, prints and photographs including;**

A colour print of 'View of Sydenham,  
Belmont and Glen-Machan'  
painted by Conor  
26in.x39½in.

A print showing service for Queen Victoria's  
Jubilee, seated in robes  
signed lower right and dated June 22 1897  
11½in.x8in.

A Photograph of Queen Victoria

A print of the Irish House of Commons

- signed Henry Birraud lower left, in pencil  
37½in.x36in.
- A large framed display of historic parliamentary occasions 1945
- A Collection of framed photographs of former speakers of the NI House of Commons
- Framed sealed indenture of the Stormont Estate
- A Collection of miscellaneous photographs of Parliament Buildings and historic events 1,000
- 11 **RITA DUFFY**  
Portrait of Mr Seamus Mallon MP standing wearing a suit beside a plaque to Ian Boroihme at Clontarf  
signed lower right 2003  
58in.x41in 10,000-15,000
- 12 **NOEL MURPHY**  
The Assembly in Session  
signed lower right  
oil on canvas  
54in.x96in 40,000-60,000
- 13 **NOEL MURPHY**  
The House Will Divide  
pencil drawing  
signed lower left and dated 2002  
18 ½ in.x 27in 3,000-5,000
- 14 **CAROL GRAHAM**  
Portrait of Lord Alderdice standing wearing a suit in the chamber  
signed lower left and dated 2005  
63in.x45in 2,000-2,500
- 15 **ROWEL FRIERS**  
46 drawings + prints of members of the Northern Ireland Parliament 1972  
inscribed  
8in.x6in 4,000-6,000
- CLOTHING**
- 16 The Speakers state robes, applications on edges guilt black (fire damage) and speakers full bottomed wig in carry case and collection of clerks uniforms and wigs 5,000-7,000
- 17 Black Rod's uniform and painted ceremonial sword, scabbard and case.  
Case 34in. long 250-350
- MISCELLANEOUS**
- 18 An EIIR Coronation decagonal tapering vase presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly.  
Decorated with the Queen's beasts  
Made by British Potters 40,000-50,000
- 19 A Japanese officer's sword presented by Lord Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia  
41in. long 1,500-2,000
- 20 Kridah Kobah  
A bust of Sir Frederick Temple  
bronze  
18½in. high 2,000-4,000
- 21 A ninteenth century mahogany mantle clock  
'Evill of Bath' with pierces sides and glazed back (severe damage to veneer)  
16½in. high 3,500-4,500
- 22 A model of Thiepval Tower in wood, made by  
Major John Jordan, April 1961  
23in. high 400-600

- |    |   |              |
|----|---|--------------|
| 23 | A late nineteenth century bronze French mantle clock, with Celtic swordsman clock and ropework presented in 1923<br>31in. high                        | 800-1,000    |
| 24 | Two parcel guilt and sealing wax red leather dispatch boxes embossed with Royal Arms of Ulster<br>26in  | 6,000-8,000  |
| 25 | A green leather dispatch box embossed with Royal Arms of Ulster and cipher of George V<br>26½in   | 3,000-5,000  |
| 26 | The bell from 'HMS Ulster' on an oak stand, the anchor and wreath over a bell-shaped support on a strapped plinth<br>70in. wide                       | 1,000-1,500  |
| 27 | A pair of Victorian style yew and mahogany dining table, jardinières, the bowls on carved columns and spreading base. 'Mountjoy Labels'<br>40in. high | 7,000-10,000 |

**SILVER**

- |    |  |               |
|----|--|---------------|
| 36 | Black Rod's Wand of Office; ebony with silver guilt mounts with rampant ceremonial lion and bulbous gold scrolling decoration<br>London 1923 A/S<br>37 ¼ in long<br>presented by the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava,<br>First Speaker of the Senate in Northern Ireland | 8,000-10,000  |
| 37 | A pair of silver maces<br>London 1924<br>42in. long  | 30,000-40,000 |

**Hansard Reports**

**Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission to list the members who have decided not to receive hard copy daily Hansard reports. (AQW 6001/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr P Butler):** Please find attached a list of those Members who do not receive hard copies of the Hansard daily report.

**List of MLAs who do not receive hard copy daily Hansard reports**

- Ms M Anderson
- Mr D Bradley
- Mrs M Bradley
- Lord Browne
- Mr T Burns
- Mr D Burnside
- Mr F Cobain
- Mr J Craig
- Mr L Cree
- Mr J Donaldson
- Mr A Easton
- Mr T Elliott
- Dr S Farry
- Mrs C Hanna
- Mr W Irwin
- Mrs D Kelly
- Mr T Lunn

- Mr J McCallister
- Mr F McCann
- Mr R McCartney
- Mr B McCrea
- Mr I McCrea
- Dr W McCrea
- Dr A McDonnell
- Mr M McGuinness
- Mr G McHugh
- Mr D McKay
- Mr M McLaughlin
- Mr A McQuillan
- Mr A Maskey
- Mr J O'Dowd
- Mr I Paisley Jnr
- Ms D Purvis
- Ms S Ramsey
- Ms C Ruane
- Mr D Simpson
- Mr J Spratt
- Mr B Wilson
- Mr S Wilson

### **Hansard Reports**

**Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission to list the members who have decided not to receive hard copies of the Bound volumes of Hansard. (AQW 6002/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr P Butler ):** Please find attached a list of those Members who do not receive the bound volumes of the Official Report (Hansard).

**List of MLAs who do not receive Bound Volumes of the Official Report (Hansard)**

- Ms M Anderson
- Lord Browne
- Mr G Campbell
- Mr F Cobain
- Mr T Elliott
- Mr T Gallagher
- Mr W Irwin
- Mrs D Kelly
- Mr J McCallister
- Mr F McCann
- Mr R McCartney
- Mr B McCrea
- Mr M McGuinness
- Mr D McKay
- Mr A Maskey
- Ms S Ramsey

- Mr G Robinson
- Ms C Ruane
- Mr S Wilson

### Hard Copies of Hansard

**Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission how much on average it costs to provide each MLA with hard copies of Hansards, since devolution. (AQW 6004/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** Between 8th May 2007 and 24th February 2009 (date last invoiced to the Assembly Commission) the average cost of producing the official report for each MLA was £2.30.

There have been 125 days of production and in total 26,241 copies of the official report have been produced, of which 12,082 have been issued to MLAs.

### Mobile Phone Providers

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to the answer to AQW 7591/08 if any other mobile phone providers have enhanced their network coverage in Parliament Buildings. (AQW 6049/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** Further to AQW 7591/09 discussions are ongoing with Orange to install a signal booster in Parliament Buildings. It is hoped that this work will take place within the next few months. Upon completion of this work there will be enhanced network coverage for Orange, O2 and Vodafone mobile phone users.

### Fax Machines in Parliament Buildings

**Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission what the age is of the fax machines that are provided to MLAs in Parliament Buildings; and if they are all in operational order. (AQW 6217/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** The Assembly Commission has delegated responsibility for the provision and maintenance of fax machines to Building Management Branch (BMB) within Properties Directorate. BMB have confirmed that the age of the fax machines provided to MLA's varies from office to office ranging from new to over 3 years of age.

To the best of BMB's knowledge all of the fax machines provided to MLA's are fully operational. However, if MLA's are experiencing any problems with their fax machines BMB will arrange for them to be repaired or replaced if they contact the Helpdesk on 25999.

In addition to this the IS Office, through the centrally funded IT equipment allocation for MLAs, has supplied each MLA with an OKI C5550 Multifunction Printer which has fax capability. These printers are based mainly in Constituency Offices however each Party has been allocated a number of these printers for use in Parliament Buildings in the respective central Party Support offices. These printers were purchased in May 2007 and the fax facility is fully operational and configured where requested by the MLA. Information relating to the capabilities of these types of printers, including the fax facility, was issued to all MLAs prior to the ICT refresh.

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 27 March 2009

## Written Answers to Questions

### OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

#### Press and Public Relations Staff

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many staff are employed in its Department in a press and public relations capacity, and what (i) is the annual wage bill; and (ii) are other operational costs associated with this group. (AQW 5475/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness):** There are currently four Press Officers employed within the department who provide direct support to the First Minister, deputy First Minister, and Junior Ministers on core press and public relations activity. The approximate annual wage bill for this group for this financial year based on the latest available figures is £182,899.

A further two officers support the work of the department and provide media planning support to the other 10 departments. In addition, the Director and Deputy Director of the Executive Information Service also provide input as part of their cross-departmental responsibility and in managing the provision of communications across all Executive departments.

The approximate annual wage bill for this group for this financial year based on the latest available figures is £264,035.

It is not possible to provide a disaggregated figure for the operational costs for this group.

#### Childcare Provision

**Mr Durkan** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) to confirm if the preliminary report on childcare provision to the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People is complete; (ii) when it will be published; (iii) to set out its main findings; (iv) to detail its recommendations; and (v) when a draft Child Care Strategy will be published for consultation. (AQW 5856/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** A paper on childcare provision is still in preparation. The child poverty sub-group of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People is due to consider the paper in March, after which the report will be forwarded to the Ministerial Sub-Committee for consideration.

It is intended that the paper will be made publicly available after consideration by the Executive. It is not possible to give a precise date at the moment but we would aim to make the paper available as soon as possible.

The paper will put forward a range of policy proposals and options which will require careful consideration and, subject to Executive approval, these will be outlined in the published document. The main findings and recommendations that flow from further consideration of the paper by the Ministerial Sub-Committee will be made available when agreed by the Sub-Committee and the Executive.

Executive decisions on the direction of child care policy will take into account the wider 10-year strategy for children and previous child care strategies, and there will be consultation on the resulting child care policy proposals.

### Commissioner for Children and Young People

**Mr Weir** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the total amount spent by the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner on legal fees in each of the last three years. (AQW 5964/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The amounts paid in legal fees by the Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland in each of the last three years were:

2005/2006	£27,360.68
2006/2007	£39,336.68
2007/2008	£52,914.55

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has various controls in place to monitor the Commissioner's expenditure. These controls in the main are operated by its sponsoring body, the Children and Young People's Unit within OFMDFM.

The relationship between the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Commissioner is set out in the Management Statement and Financial Memorandum (MSFM). The MSFM sets out the broad framework within which the Commissioner operates and is based on a Treasury model. The Financial Memorandum section of the MSFM sets out in great detail certain aspects of the financial provisions, which the Commissioner is required to observe. The MSFM is "signed off" by the Commissioner and the OFMDFM Accounting Officer.

OFMDFM and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) also agree the Commissioner's business plan. The Business Plan includes key targets and milestones for the year immediately ahead, and links to budgeting information so that resources allocated to achieve specific objectives can readily be identified by OFMDFM.

To monitor actual expenditure against planned expenditure, the Commissioner's monthly draw down requests are accompanied by monthly profiles and explanations on expenditure, which are scrutinised before approval of payment is given. Also, updates are requested from the Commissioner at each of the financial monitoring rounds.

Quarterly liaison meetings take place between the Commissioner and departmental officials. An official from the Children and Young People's Unit also attends the Commissioner's Audit and Risk Committee quarterly meetings and reports back to the department any issues raised.

To monitor the Commissioner's accountability functions a senior OFMDFM official holds Accountability Meetings with the Commissioner and her Chief Executive every six months, mid year and end of year. The end of year meeting is attended by the Department's Accounting Officer.

In addition to these procedures, all circulars and guidance issued by DFP are brought to the Commissioner's attention.

However, we would ask you to note that, in order to ensure appropriate independence of the Commissioner's office, relationships between the Commissioner, Ministers and OFMDFM are governed by the 'arm's length' principle, wherein the primary role of Ministers is to set the Commissioner's legal and financial framework and the structure of her funding and management. Within this framework it is the role of the Commissioner to determine her policy and activities in keeping with her statutory responsibilities and the requirements of Assembly policy. OFMDFM has the right of access to carry out any examination of the internal financial control systems as may be required by its Accounting Officer.

The total amount of funding provided to the Commissioner in financial year 07/08 was £1,897,000.

### US Pre-Clearance at NI Airports

**Mr Durkan** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether its office has had any discussions in relation to the establishment of United States Customs Border Protection Pre-Clearance at Northern Ireland airports; and (ii) what further plans it has to pursue this. (AQW 6206/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Belfast International Airport is the only Northern Ireland airport with flights to the United States and due to the low volume of direct flights we have not had any discussions about arrangements for pre-clearance of US Immigration at airports here nor do we plan to pursue the issue at this time.

### Capital Realisation Taskforce

**Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the Capital Realisation Taskforce. (AQO 2391/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Following the report of the Capital Realisations Taskforce in December 2007, a Central Assets Realisation Team (CART) has been established within Strategic Investment Board Limited. Work has proceeded on the development of a comprehensive Central Asset Register and preparatory work on the production of an Asset Management Strategy as recommended in the report. Work has also commenced with Departments on the identification of opportunities for a number of key surplus and underutilised public sector assets.

In view of the considerable changes in markets that have taken place since the economic downturn, we have invited Ed Vernon, who led the original Capital Realisations Taskforce, to report on progress since his original report, reviewing and re-drawing conclusions where necessary in the light of changed circumstances.

### Departmental Accounts

**Mr McNarry** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) to outline the process by which its Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits its Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail its Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6258/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:**

- (i) OFMDFM's Resource Accounts are audited under the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, and in accordance with United Kingdom Auditing Standards, as issued by the Auditing Practices Board.
- (ii) The accounts are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office.
- (iii) The C&AG formed the opinion that OFMDFM's Resource Accounts for the 2005/06, 2006/07, and 2007/08 financial years:
  - gave a true and fair view;
  - had been properly prepared in accordance with Department of Finance and Personnel directions issued under the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001;
  - the information which comprises the Directors' Report and the Management Commentary was consistent with the financial statements; and
  - that in all material respects, the expenditure and income had been applied to the purposes intended by the Assembly, and that the financial transactions conform to the authorities which govern them.

### Commissioner for Children and Young People

**Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much money has been spent by the Commissioner for Children and Young People on litigation in relation to smacking children. (AQW 6321/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The amount of money which has been spent to date by the Commissioner for Children and Young People on litigation on the retention in law of a defence of reasonable punishment is £81,329.15.

### Recent Visit to the United States

**Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to the recent visit to the United States (i) to detail the costs involved, including (a) flights; (b) hotels; and (c) transportation; and (ii) to detail how many officials were in attendance and their associated costs. (AQW 6396/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** We are not yet in a position to provide all the information requested. We have still to receive some of the invoices associated with our visit to the United States. We will provide you with a full answer once this information becomes available.

### Strategic Investment Board

**Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the salary scales in the Strategic Investment Board; and (ii) the number of staff members in each salary bracket. (AQW 6415/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The Strategic Investment Board does not have salary scales. Starting salaries are determined on a personal basis, taking account of market conditions and the skills, experience and qualifications of the individual member of staff. Once appointed, salaries are not increased (except for a cost-of-living increment which has been set at 2% for each of the last three years).

The salaries of SIB staff are set out below.

	Actual	Min	Max	Number
Chief Executive	159,197			1
Chief Operating Officer	100,825			1
Legal Director	137,700			1
Advisers		58,000	80,000	8
		80,000	100,000	5
		100,000	120,000	3
Finance & Administration Staff		17,000	26,000	3
		26,000	36,000	3

### Economic Development: US Trip

**Ms J McCann** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what sections of the economy it targeted for development, in its recent trip to the USA. (AQO 2350/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The United States is a vitally important source of investment for Northern Ireland and our visit to the US provided an opportunity to promote business, investment and tourism opportunities and to further our international image and reputation.

We had a very useful series of meetings with business leaders in corporate America targeting not only key sectors which are already established in Northern Ireland such as ICT and manufacturing, but also emerging sectors such as life and health sciences and film production.

We met a wide range of companies in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Washington including those with an existing presence in Northern Ireland, such as Allstate. We reaffirmed our ongoing support to existing investors for their commitment here and met with potential new investors to highlight the opportunities that Northern Ireland offers.

We were greatly encouraged by the positive welcome we received and by the willingness of corporate America to look at inward investment opportunities. This was reflected by the New York State Comptroller, Thomas Di Napoli's decision to provide \$30 million for projects in NI. This is very significant investment and we very much welcome the vote of confidence from the State Comptroller's Office in NI as an investment location.

We delivered a very powerful message to corporate America that NI remains an excellent investment opportunity and is open for business. We have no doubt that more US-based companies will take up the opportunity to invest here and we are also confident that other positive news will emerge as the result of our visit to the US.

## US Subsidiary Companies

**Mrs O'Neill** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the companies it met in the USA which have subsidiary companies based in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2354/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The United States is a vitally important source of investment for Northern Ireland and our visit to the US provided an opportunity to promote business, investment and tourism opportunities and to further our international image and reputation.

We had a very useful series of meetings with business leaders in corporate America targeting not only key sectors which are already established in Northern Ireland such as ICT and manufacturing, but also emerging sectors such as life and health sciences and film production.

We met a wide range of companies in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Washington including those with an existing presence in Northern Ireland, such as Allstate. We reaffirmed our ongoing support to existing investors for their commitment here and met with potential new investors to highlight the opportunities that Northern Ireland offers.

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We delivered a very powerful message to corporate America that NI remains an excellent investment opportunity and is open for business. We have no doubt that more US-based companies will take up the opportunity to invest here and we are also confident that other positive news will emerge as the result of our visit to the US.

## Play and Leisure Policy

**Mrs M Bradley** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the implementation plan for the play and leisure policy for 0-11 year olds will be published for consultation. (AQO 2355/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** We have now established the Play and Leisure implementation group which consists of 26 members and which has been tasked with drawing up implementation plans for children in the 0-11 years and 12-18 years age groups.

We want the implementation plans to be robust and it is necessary for the groups to carry out extensive benchmarking to ensure that children and young people here will be afforded equal if not better opportunities for play and leisure than children living elsewhere in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

We want to consult directly with children and young people of all ages and this will take time to put in place and to carry out effectively.

## Efficiency Savings: Job Losses

**Mr McNarry** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following comments made by the First Minister to the press on 24 February 2009 in relation to proposed Treasury 'efficiency savings' and that this would mean job losses 'of very significant proportions', for its assessment of any planned job losses as part of this process. (AQO 2356/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** In November 2008 as part of the pre-budget report, Chancellor Alastair Darling announced that he would seek to recover £5 billion efficiency savings. We discussed this issue with the British Prime Minister on 25 February 2009. We pointed out that the comprehensive spending review settlement in October 2007 fixed funding levels for three years and we expect this to remain.

Also, we reminded Prime Minister Brown of the promise made in reaching the St Andrew's agreement that the Executive would be allowed to retain all efficiency savings identified over the CSR period to strengthen frontline service delivery.

We made it clear that we are fully supportive of all efforts to make local public services as efficient as possible. However, we remain firm in our view that efficiencies generated here should be reinvested here to improve services to local people.

We are resolved to resist all attempts to re-open the 2007 CSR settlement and impose reductions on our Budget. It would not be sensible to develop detailed plans on how we could absorb the impact of a reduction that we are determined to resist.

### Peace Process

**Mr P Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given its recent visit to the USA, what assessment it has made of how the experiences gained through the peace process can be used to benefit the global community. (AQO 2357/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Our Peace Process is based on addressing the divisions within our society. We recognise that whilst we continue to make significant progress, intolerance such as sectarianism and racism are still too evident. These blights on society have negative impacts not only on our economic prospects but in every part of the world where divided societies exist.

As we aim to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society we welcome the opportunity to share our transformation experiences with the international community.

It is important to recognise the impact of European funding over the years with its focus on Peace and Reconciliation. Through the various E.U. Peace Programmes there has been considerable investment in work at community level to build relationships which are fundamental to a sustainable peace. We have similarly benefited from external funding from the International Fund for Ireland and other philanthropic investors in our transition process.

As the European and IFI programmes enter their “sunset” phase it is incumbent upon us to ensure there is a lasting legacy from the sustained support which we have benefited from. That legacy must not be solely for all our communities but for the global community.

Our assessment of the future for sharing experiences is that whilst we must be willing to be available to share, our role is to support and encourage. We must remember that our solution is appropriate to our circumstances. It is not our role to see it replicated in other places but to help other places, other peoples, find their way forward.

### Economic Development: US Trip

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the businesses it met on its recent trip to the USA to promote economic development. (AQO 2358/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The United States is a vitally important source of investment for Northern Ireland and our visit to the US provided an opportunity to promote business, investment and tourism opportunities and to further our international image and reputation.

We had a very useful series of meetings with business leaders in corporate America targeting not only key sectors which are already established in Northern Ireland such as ICT and manufacturing, but also emerging sectors such as life and health sciences and film production.

We met a wide range of companies in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Washington including those with an existing presence in Northern Ireland, such as Allstate. We reaffirmed our ongoing support to existing investors for their commitment here and met with potential new investors to highlight the opportunities that Northern Ireland offers.

We were greatly encouraged by the positive welcome we received and by the willingness of corporate America to look at inward investment opportunities. This was reflected by the New York State Comptroller, Thomas Di Napoli's decision to provide \$30 million for projects in NI. This is very significant investment and we very much welcome the vote of confidence from the State Comptrollers Office in NI as an investment location.

We delivered a very powerful message to corporate America that NI remains an excellent investment opportunity and is open for business. We have no doubt that more US-based companies will take up the opportunity to invest here and we are also confident that other positive news will emerge as the result of our visit to the US.

### Civil Service: Press/PR Staff

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how many staff are employed in press and public relations offices across the Civil Service; and the total cost to the public purse that this represents. (AQO 2359/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** There are currently 50 Press Officers employed across the 11 departments who provide direct support to Ministers on core press and public relations activity. Press Officer is defined as Information grade staff who deal directly with media queries, handling the media, media monitoring, news releases, event management and general communications support.

Information Officers are outposted to departments who cover their individual salary costs. Therefore the total salary costs are not held by OFMDFM.

### Racism

**Mr Molloy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on its efforts to tackle racism. (AQO 2360/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is fully committed to building a cohesive, shared and integrated society for all.

The Programme for Government confirms our commitment to promote tolerance, inclusion and well being. Part of this is the commitment to continue to challenge racism, sectarianism and intolerance which tarnish our reputation, blight our economic prospects and have a corrosive effect on our society. The Executive is fully committed to addressing these divisions within our society.

We want to ensure that newcomers to our shores are integrated into communities which are not divided, separate or unequal, whilst at the same time addressing the challenges that face new and host communities.

To this aim, we are finalising proposals for a draft Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. It will build on some of the excellent work which is already being done, particularly by district councils and community organisations, to address the challenges which local communities are facing. Action to tackle sectarianism, racism and intolerance will be at the core of these proposals. This will be subject to a full consultation and equality impact assessment. Whilst the details of the policy proposals are finalised, the work of challenging sectarianism, racism and all forms of intolerance is continuing with the active support of OFMDFM Ministers.

As part of the ongoing work we recognise and value the vital role played by groups working with minority ethnic people on the ground. In following through on this recognition we have recently announced a further tranche of funding to support work with minority ethnic people and communities in the financial year 2009/10.

We are pleased to say the £1 million we have allocated this year represents a substantial increase on the previous annual spend prior to the restoration of devolution.

The aims of the fund align with our Programme for Government commitments by supporting work which contributes to the promotion of good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds, the building of community cohesion, and facilitation of integration.

### Security Situation

**Mr Simpson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether it has met with the Chief Constable of the PSNI in relation to the current security situation. (AQO 2361/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** As the Member may be aware, following the shootings of two soldiers at Massarene Barracks on Saturday 7th March and of a PSNI officer on duty in Craigavon on 9th March, we met the Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Orde and the Security Minister, Paul Goggins, at Stormont Castle on Tuesday 10th March.

The meeting was very productive and we will, of course, continue to keep the situation under review and hold further talks as necessary.

### NICCY: Spend on Legal Fees

**Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the money spent on legal fees by the Commissioner for Children and Young People since its inception. (AQO 2363/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The first Commissioner for Children and Young People was appointed in October 2003. The amounts paid in legal fees since then are as follows:

2003/2004	nil
2004/2005	£17,953.25
2005/2006	£27,360.68
2006/2007	£39,336.68
2007/2008	£52,914.55
2008/ to date	£64,040.54

At the recent ruling on the Judicial Review appeal on Reasonable Parental Punishment, the Commissioner was ordered to pay the respondent's costs. The respondent is not yet able to provide a schedule of costs for the appeal hearing.

## DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Farm Modernisation Programme

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much the delivery organisation charge will be for the Farm Modernisation Programme. (AQW 6000/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew):** I can not provide an answer to that question at this time as the contract to deliver those Axis 1 Measures, including the Farm Modernisation Programme, are still in negotiation and has not yet been finalised.

However, I will write to you with that information when it is available.

### Distribution of Department Publications

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6081/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Similar to other Departments, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development circulates documents in accordance with central guidance provided by Machinery of Government Division in the Office of the First and deputy First Minister.

Under this guidance, Departments have a statutory responsibility to consult with a range of stakeholders, including political representatives and other interested parties, on a range of policy and legislative proposals. In doing so, DARD has an obligation in certain circumstances to provide hard-copies of documents (e.g. to political Parties and Assembly Committees).

MLAs do not normally receive hard-copies of reports but are made aware of these via the 'Papers Presented List' circulated by the Assembly Business Office. Similarly, MLAs do not receive hard-copies of consultation documents, however, the Department will write to them advising that the consultation is taking place and where they can obtain copies (either in hard-copy from the Assembly Library or electronically via the Department's web-site).

### Flooding Problem of the Loop River

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in addressing the flooding problem of the Loop River at the bridge over the Castlereagh Road. (AQW 6124/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** DARD Rivers Agency is progressing with the Flood Alleviation Scheme for the Loop River in the Castlereagh area including major crossings of Castlereagh Road and Ladas Drive. It is planned that the associated works will be integrated with the proposed major East Belfast Partnership (EBP) 'GREENWAY' project which is scheduled to commence during 2010. In advance of works, Rivers Agency is currently carrying out culvert maintenance, which includes culvert cleaning, on the Loop River system in the Castlereagh area. Rivers Agency has also reached agreement with Roads Service to put in place further interim works on the Castlereagh Road. When completed this arrangement will enable floodwaters that escape from upstream of the Castlereagh Road bridge to be directed back into the river downstream of the bridge and will also facilitate pumping floodwaters away from the site. It is anticipated that these interim works will commence in the current financial year.

### Ten-Day Payment Policy

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures her Department has in place to ensure invoices are paid within ten-days. (AQW 6129/09)

**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 my Department and its agencies 81.5% of the invoices paid in February 2009 were paid within the 10 day target.

DARD will continue to monitor the 10 day prompt payment target and inform business areas of their performance.

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what are the (i) projects; and (ii) amounts of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6157/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** There are no capital projects planned by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10 and (b) 2010/11.

### European Fisheries Fund

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what the outcomes are from the work of the European Fisheries Fund; including how many workers will be retained and how many new jobs will be created. (AQW 6182/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The European Fisheries Fund does not have specific employment objectives. Its role is to support the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy and therefore contribute to sustainability in economic, environmental and social terms, including promotion of a sustainable balance between resources and the fishing capacity of the Community fishing fleet. Our overarching aim for fisheries and aquaculture management is for "a fisheries industry that is sustainable, profitable and supports strong local communities, managed effectively as an integral part of coherent policies for the marine environment". As a result, employment targets were not sought by, or included in the Operational Programme for the Fund approved by the Commission. Due to the dynamic environment our fishing industry operates in, it is not possible to quantify what impact the Programme will have on job creation or retention. The EFF will endeavour to provide support to the industry in efficiently adapting its current capacity to match projected fishing opportunities.

My department intends to open four key measures later this month for applications. These measures are Productive Investments in Aquaculture; Processing and Marketing of Fisheries and Aquaculture products; Collective Actions; and, Fishing Ports, Landing Sites & Shelters.

Other Measures will roll out during 2009. The structure and size of Axis 1, "Measures for the adaptation of the Community Fishing" which is a key measure for our local fleet, will be informed by the work of the Fisheries Forum, which aims to report to me this April.

### Genetically Modified Crops

**Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if tests on genetically modified (GM) crops have been carried out and if so, to detail the (i) dates; (ii) sites; and (iii) crops, that have been involved. (AQW 6271/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** No trials of any Genetically Modified (GM) crops or varieties have taken place in the north of Ireland in field experiments or in crop farm-scale evaluations (FSEs).

However, there was an approved release of one GM potato breeding line in research plots at Newforge Lane in 1996. That trial was not repeated, the particular line of research was discontinued and all of the plant material was destroyed within one year of the 1996 harvest.

### Department Representatives Speaking at Public Meetings

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she is aware that representatives of her Department have been speaking at public meetings organised by Jim Allister MEP and if so, if she sanctioned the attendance of these officials. (AQW 6403/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** It is normal for officials from my Department to participate in public events where the rural community is present and where information is being provided about specific rural development programmes funded by DARD. My officials participated in an information evening for farmers and rural dwellers in the Antrim Civic Centre on 5 March 2009, which was attended by the Local Action Group for the area, GROW (Generating Rural Opportunities Within South Antrim). The evening was arranged by Jim Allister, MEP.

All information provided by officials was factual and relates only to DARD Rural Development funded programmes and funding opportunities.

### Animal Welfare Bill

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the proposed timescale for the introduction of an Animal Welfare Bill. (AQW 6410/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** In my Statement to the Assembly on 26 January 2009, I outlined the actions I had taken to date to review animal welfare legislation in the north of Ireland. DARD had previously consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006. As this was carried out under Direct Rule, I wanted to take time to fully consider existing Animal Welfare legislation and the responses received to that consultation. I have completed an initial review, and have met a range of key stakeholders both from here, Britain and the south. These meetings have been exceptionally informative.

My review of animal welfare legislation is nearing completion. I will shortly be considering what new legislation is required, and the timetable for bringing this forward.

## DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

### Sport NI

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why there has been a delay in issuing decisions on Investing in Performance Sport funding applications for 2009-2013 from Sport NI, as this is needed to enable sport governing bodies to determine if their programmes can continue. (AQW 5967/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell):** Officials from my Department are working closely with colleagues in Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) to assess the applications received from sports governing bodies under the Investing in Performance Sport programme.

The perception of delay arises purely from the volume and sequencing of the range of material that must be considered within the processes for ensuring sound economic appraisal and the invariant duty of safeguarding public funds in terms of value for money, regularity and propriety.

SNI and DCAL are fully aware of the urgency of informing organisations of awards whilst at the same time adhering to public sector accountability requirements. Approvals, if appropriate, will issue at the earliest juncture to governing bodies.

### Distribution of Department Publications

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6111/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** My Department follows OFMdfM's "Guidance on the distribution of departmental publications and consultation documents" (November 2008) in the dissemination of reports and consultation documents.

The Member will be aware that the guidance states that there is a requirement to provide hard copies of documents to certain recipients including political representatives, parliamentary contacts and Legal Deposit and other libraries.

Where appropriate my Department will endeavour to provide copies of reports and consultation documents in the requested format.

### Old Museum Arts Centre

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the progress of the Old Museum Art Centre's new Arts Centre. (AQW 6140/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Old Museum Arts Centre (OMAC) plan to build a new arts centre called the 'Metropolitan Arts Centre' in Saint Anne's Square in Cathedral Quarter.

OMAC are currently progressing through the second stage of a two stage contract. In parallel, the project will be undergoing a Gateway Review in coming months. The outcome of these processes will determine the construction start date. Whilst there has been some slippage in the original programme, this is not significant and the project is due to be completed in May 2011 (previous completion date March 2011).

### Departmental Accounts

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to outline the process by which his Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits his Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail his Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6262/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:**

- (i) The Department's Resource Accounts are audited in accordance with an agreed and documented Audit Strategy between the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Department, under the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2001, and in accordance with UK Auditing Standards as issued by the Auditing Standards Board.

- (ii) The Department's Resource Accounts are audited by Comptroller and Auditor General, and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office.
- (iii) The Department's final audited Resource Accounts for the last three financial years have been laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly and are available in electronic format on the Department's website. ([http://www.dcal.gov.uk/index/quick-links/general\\_publications/other\\_publications.htm](http://www.dcal.gov.uk/index/quick-links/general_publications/other_publications.htm))

### ITV Programmes

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he would consider contacting ITV to ask it to re-think its intention to discontinue producing (i) Heartbeat; (ii) The Royal; (iii) The Bill; and (iv) Midsomer Murders. (AQW 6317/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I am aware of ITV's proposals to scale back production for some programmes and decrease the level of scheduling for others and understand that the drama productions mentioned have long-standing audience support.

However, broadcasters such as ITV have faced increasing difficulties in recent years in generating income particularly from advertising sources. This was a key conclusion of the recent Ofcom Review of Public Service Broadcasting.

Whilst I will continue to engage with ITV as appropriate, ITV is a commercial organisation and will make business decisions based on the prevailing circumstances. I would also note that the current economic crisis has exacerbated the difficulties faced by broadcasting companies such as ITV which are reliant on raising revenue from advertising.

### Joint Eel Management Plan

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if the joint Eel Management plan with the Republic of Ireland authorities for the Lough Erne Basin has being agreed and submitted to the European Authorities. (AQW 6373/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Erne Eel Management Plan was forwarded to the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) who submitted the plan to the EU Commission by the due date of 31st December 2008.

### Loyal Order Events

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in relation to Loyal Order events and functions, how many invitations he has (i) received; (ii) accepted; and (iii) attended, since he took up office. (AQW 6378/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Since becoming Minister I have received three invitations to Loyal Order events, of which I have been able to attend one event.

### Glenavy River

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5853/09, to make a statement on the restocking of the Glenavy River with a new fish population by the Glenavy Conservation and District Angling Club; and to give his assessment of the potential for the long term success of this project. (AQW 6407/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** On the basis of advice from DCAL Fisheries Officers, the Glenavy Conservation and District Angling Club has commenced a programme to restore self sustaining populations of trout and salmon to the Glenavy River to the level that their environment is now capable of supporting. This will restore biodiversity value to the river and provide an angling opportunity.

Provided that the environmental requirements of the fish are sustained, angling pressure is managed and poaching is prevented, then the project has the potential to yield sustainable environmental, social and

recreational benefits. The project should provide some direct economic value to Northern Ireland through enhancing the angling product in due course.

## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

### Teaching Vacancies

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Education how many teaching vacancies there are in each school in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 5814/09)

**The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane):** Bíonn an Roinn ag iarraidh eolais faoi fholúntais múinteoirí ó gach scoil dheontaschúnta ar bhonn bhliantúil.

The Department seeks information on teacher vacancies from all grant-aided schools on an annual basis. The information provides a “snapshot” of vacancies at a specific date each year. Details for the Lagan Valley parliamentary constituency are set out below:

#### NUMBER OF VACANCIES STILL TO BE FILLED DURING THE 2008/09 ACADEMIC YEAR AT 3RD NOVEMBER 2008 IN SCHOOLS IN THE LAGAN VALLEY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

School name	Permanent		Temporary	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Largymore PS	1	0	0	0
St Joseph's PS	2	0	1	1
St Michael's PS (FINNIS)	0	0	0	1
St Patrick's High School	0	0	3	0
Parkview Special School	1	0	0	0

### Ten-Day Payment Target

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education how much of the total amount due to suppliers was paid within the ten-day payment target, in the last year. (AQW 5820/09)

**The Minister of Education:** From December 2008, when the ten-day payment target was introduced, until 28 February 2009 the Department of Education has paid £1,592,385.50 of the £3,306,720.43 due to suppliers in line with the ten-day payment target.

Tá an méid iomlán atá dlite do sholáthraithe bunaithe ar iarratais íocaíochta a fuarthas i mBrainse na gCuntas sa Roinn.

The total amount due to suppliers is based on payment requests received in the Department's Accounts Branch.

### Neighbourhood Renewal Projects

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Education what Neighbourhood Renewal projects (i) were funded by her Department up to February 2009; and (ii) are to be funded by her Department from March 2009, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5857/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Fuair mo Roinn aistrithe teicniúla acmhainní ó DSD, do na blianta airgeadais 2007/08 agus 2008/09, faoi choinne clár oideachais a chuireann le spriocanna straitéiseacha na Straitéise um Athnuachan Comharsanachta mar atá leagtha amach sa tábla thíos.

My Department has received, for each of the 2007/08 and 2008/09 financial years, technical transfers of resources from DSD in relation to education programmes that contribute to the strategic objectives of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy as set out in the table below. In relation to the 2009/10 and 2010/11 financial years the figures inserted below are resources that DE expects to receive from DSD, via in year monitoring rounds, to allow for the continuation of the programmes.

Programme	07/08 £000s	08/09 £000s	09/10 £000s	10/11 £000s	Constituency
Ballysally PS – nurturing community	73	43	44	-	East Derry
Ballykeel Youth Club	21	-	-	-	North Antrim
Dunclug College/St Patrick's College – booster clinic GCSE/A levels	-	11	-	-	North Antrim
Dunclug Youth initiative	68	61	-	-	North Antrim
Ballymena Citizenship and Employability Project	-	83	73	75	North Antrim
Ballyclare SS – breakfast/homework club	-	3	5	5	South Antrim
Mount St Catherine's PS – out of school club	21	-	-	-	Newry and Armagh
Coalisland – programme to improve ed. attainment	10	-	-	-	Mid Ulster
Coalisland – social renewal ed. programme	10	79	77	-	Mid Ulster
Dungannon – programme to improve ed. attainment	10	18	-	-	Fermanagh and South Tyrone
Dungannon – social renewal ed. programme	10	40	50	-	Fermanagh and South Tyrone
BONUS programme, Derry (Board Operated Nurture Unit Support)	105	75	-	-	Foyle
<b>Totals</b>	<b>£318k</b>	<b>£413k</b>	<b>£249k</b>	<b>£80k</b>	

I do fully support the objectives of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and, through my focus on raising standards in education and, particularly, on tackling educational underachievement I am confident that education can and will make a real contribution to the success of that strategy. I am also encouraged that most of the Neighbourhood Partnerships have identified education as a key issue for their areas and I can assure them that Education and Library Boards and other education bodies will work closely with them, including through programmes such as Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry, to deliver improvements. The interest and involvement of local communities in education is a key factor in supporting the work of principals and teachers and in encouraging our young people to succeed and do well at school. I have seen at first hand through programmes such as Extended Schools and the Full Service School programme at the Belfast Boys and Girls Model schools examples of how schools are developing working relationships with parents, the wider community, health and social services and childcare agencies.

### Classroom Assistants

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Education if payments of arrears to all classroom assistants will be completed by 31 March 2009. (AQW 5921/09)

**The Minister of Education:**

#### Education and Library Boards

The timing of payments depends on the agreement of individual career histories and job descriptions between the classroom assistants and their school principals and the return of that documentation to the Boards. Individual Boards are at different stages of progression. However, a large proportion of classroom assistants in special schools have already received the arrears due. All Boards have confirmed that they are working towards a conclusion at the earliest possible date.

**Scoileanna Gramadaí Deonacha /Imeasctha faoi Chothabháil Stáit**

Maidir leis na costais a bhaineann le cur i bhfeidhm an phróisis phostmheastóireachta do chúntóirí ranga i scoileanna imeasctha faoi chothabháil stáit (GMI) agus i scoileanna gramadaí deonacha (VG), b'fhéidir gur eol duit gur ceist í seo a bhaineann leis na Boird Ghobharnóirí féin mar fhostóirí ó cheart.

### **Voluntary Grammar/Grant-Maintained Integrated Schools**

In relation to costs associated with the implementation of the job evaluation process for classroom assistants in grant-maintained integrated (GMI) and voluntary grammar (VG) schools, you may be aware that this is a matter for individual Boards of Governors as employers in their own right. However, I have recently made available additional resources to those VG and GMI schools who have chosen to implement job evaluation exercises, to assist them with the financial pressures created by this exercise. The Department is still in the process of gathering the information required for the classroom assistants. It is, therefore, unlikely that all the funding will be paid out in the current financial year.

### **Rural Proofing Procedures**

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Education to detail how many (i) administrative; and (ii) legislative actions taken by her Department have been subject to rural proofing procedures in the past three years. (AQW 6040/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Rinneadh anailís faoi phromhadh tuaithe ar dhá bheartas, mar chuid den phróiseas forbartha ar bheartais, agus is iad an dá beartas atá i gceist ná Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais agus Cuimsiú agus Muintir Nuathagtha.

Two policies, for which rural proofing analysis has been carried out, as part of the policy development process, are those for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion and Newcomers.

The need to rural proof policies is an intrinsic part of policy development and as such there is no disaggregated data on the number of administrative and legislative actions that have been subject to rural proofing procedures in the past three years

### **Teacher Training Places**

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education if there is any evidence that the economic downturn has led to an increase in applications for teacher training places. (AQO 2308/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Applications for admission to courses of initial teacher education (ITE) have for many years far exceeded the number of places available. There is no evidence at present to suggest that the economic downturn has led to an increase in applications for places on ITE in the north of Ireland.

Seo a leanas líon iomlán na n-iarratas agus an cóimheas idir líon na n-iarratas agus líon na n-áiteanna atá ar fáil i leith na mblianta acadúla 2007/2008 agus 2008/09.

The total number of applications and the ratio of applications to places available in respect of the 2007/2008 and 2008/09 academic years are indicated below.

Year	No. of Applications	Ratio
2007/2008	5083	8:1
2008/2009	4130	7:1

### **Accidents Involving Schools Buses**

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Education how many accidents involving schools buses have occurred in each of the last three years (a) in total; and (b) by Education and Library Board. (AQW 6054/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Seo a leanas líon iomlán na dtimpistí a bhain le busanna scoile na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne i ngach bliain le tri bliana anuas:

The total number of accidents involving Education and Library Board school buses that occurred in each of the last three years are as follows:

**BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD:**

Year	Number of Accidents
2006/07	11
2007/08	25
2008/09	31

**NORTH-EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD:**

Year	Number of Accidents
2006/07	17
2007/08	18
2008/09	22

**SOUTH-EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD:**

Year	Number of Accidents
2006/07	14
2007/08	12
2008/09	31

**SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD:**

Year	Number of Accidents
2006/07	73
2007/08	54
2008/09	76

**WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD:**

Year	Number of Accidents
2006/07	36
2007/08	56
2008/09	30

**TOTAL NUMBER OF ACCIDENTS:**

Year	Number of Accidents
2006/07	151
2007/08	165
2008/09	190

The vast majority of the accidents recorded are of a minor nature and did not involve injury to children or adults.

Translink has advised that, as it does not operate a dedicated school fleet, it does not record the information in the format requested. In light of recent calls for this type of information, Translink is developing a system that will allow for the provision of these data in the future.

### School E-mail Accounts

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Education what regulations are in place to govern the use of school e-mail accounts by staff for party political purposes. (AQW 6056/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is ceist í seo a bhaineann leis na scoileanna iad féin. Caithfidh na Boird Gobhanóirí cinntiú go bhfuil beartas ag na scoileanna a mhíníonn úsáid shábháilte, inghlactha agus éifeachtach na hIdirlíne agus uirlisí eile digiteacha teicneolaíochta.

This is a matter for schools themselves. Boards of Governors must ensure that their schools have a policy on the safe, acceptable and effective use of the Internet and other digital technology tools. They must also actively promote safe and acceptable working practices for all staff and pupils.

Acceptable use policies detail the ways in which ICT facilities can and cannot be used by pupils and staff in the school; state what monitoring will take place; and stipulate the possible disciplinary consequences for breach of rules. Any abuses which arise within schools should be subject to the rules and regulations of the school.

The Department has provided guidance to schools on the wide range of issues that their acceptable use policies should address. If there is evidence of a need for greater clarity, it will review that guidance and strengthen the advice within it.

### Middletown Centre for Autism

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education to provide the total cost of the Middletown Centre for each year since its inception; and to outline any ways in which this cost has inhibited the delivery of autism educational services. (AQW 6099/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Féach an tábla thíos ina bhfuil an t-eolas atá mar fhreagra ar an chéad chuid de do cheist.

Please see the table below with the information required for the first part of your question.

Year	Type	Amount
2002/03	Revenue	£25,615.00
	Capital	£0.00
	Other	£29,454.19
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£55,069.19</b>
2003/04	Revenue	£141,098.79
	Capital	£0.00
	Other	£40,477.59
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£181,576.38</b>
2004/05	Revenue	£176,272.68
	Capital - Purchase	£1,500,000.00
	Other	£52,922.49
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£1,729,195.17</b>
2005/06	Revenue	£56,303.86
	Capital	£0.00
	Other	£47,658.58
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£103,962.44</b>

Year	Type	Amount
2006/07	Revenue	£84,277.19
	Capital	£0.00
	Other	£54,945.97
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£139,223.16</b>
2007/08	Revenue	£376,116.68
	Capital	£130,842.14
	Other	£57,742.81
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£564,701.63</b>
2008/09 To Date	Revenue	£531,554.21
	Capital	£61,725
	Other	£44,548
	<b>Total</b>	<b>£637,827.21</b>

In answer to the second part of your question, I can confirm that the funding for the Middletown Centre for Autism has been additional money secured specifically for its purpose. The funding for the Centre has in no way inhibited the delivery of any autism educational service. Indeed, an additional £7.5 million has been provided for autism related services over the past five years to provide enhanced services; this includes in excess of £600k per annum earmarked directly to Education and Library Boards for the operation of an Autistic Spectrum Disorder 5-Board Group, which provides the key professional link between Board services and the Middletown Centre for Autism.

### Ten-Day Payment Policy

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Education what measures her Department has in place to ensure invoices are paid within ten-days. (AQW 6127/09)

**The Minister of Education:** The Department of Education strongly supports the target of making payments within ten working days. Guidance was issued internally within the Department in December 2008 stressing the importance of this new target and the need for all Branches to ensure payments are processed without undue delay.

Thug an Roinn isteach monatóireacht mhíosúil agus tuairisciú míosúil ar an sprioc nua seo chuig ardbhainistíocht.

Monthly monitoring and reporting to senior management against this new target has been introduced by the Department.

### Reducing Stress in the Workplace

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education, given that stress is the primary reason for absence from work, to outline what actions her Department intends to bring forward to increase motivation and morale and reduce stress levels in the workplace. (AQW 6184/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Caithfidh gach bainisteoir líne i mo Roinn feidhmíocht a bhfoirne a bhainistiú trí húsáid a bhaint as an Creat um Bhainistíocht Feidhmíochta den NICS mar uirlís le hinspreagadh agus meanma a fheabhasú.

All line managers in my Department are required to manage the performance of their staff using the NICS Performance Management Framework as a tool to improve motivation and morale. As part of this process, line managers ensure that objectives which are agreed by staff are achievable and where concerns are raised, action is taken to address them.

Staff who indicate that their sickness absence is stress-related are sent a questionnaire which asks for details of any work related issues that are causing stress. Where these are identified, action is taken to address the issues and facilitate a return to work.

My Department actively promotes a number of support services including, the Occupational Health Service, the Welfare Support Service and the Employee Assistance Programme which offers free, confidential, independent advice and support to staff.

Throughout the year training opportunities are available to assist staff with managing stress and to help line managers to identify and manage stress in the workplace. Wellbeing Awareness roadshows are being held for all DE staff in March/April 2009; these will provide staff with advice and information on healthy lifestyle issues including the reduction of stress.

### Closure of Donaghadee High School

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education what policy has the South Eastern Education and Library Board in place to deal with the closure of Donaghadee High School. (AQW 6196/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá tugtha le fios dom ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go bhfuil sé ag iarraidh, ar bhonn gníomhach, iomarcaíocht éigeantach do fhoireann múinteoireachta a sheachaint trí phróiseas iomarcaíochta aistrithe a chur ar fáil.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that it is actively attempting to obviate compulsory redundancies for teaching staff through a transferred redundancy process. Teachers have been provided with a list of alternative posts they may wish to consider transferring to. Staff who do not wish to be considered for a transferred redundancy will receive a redundancy payment and, if applicable, early release of pension.

As the staff at Donaghadee High School are employed by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) it is therefore a matter for that Board to consider the issues involved. However I am advised by the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the Board is actively involved directly with teaching and non teaching staff employed in Donaghadee High School and the Trade Unions concerning the closure of the school on 31 August 2009.

The Board also advises that a number of consultation meetings have already taken place with staff and Trade Unions. Individual one-to-one meetings with staff are being scheduled.

### Closure of Donaghadee High School

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education what contact has been made with the staff at Donaghadee High School in relation to transferring personnel or redundancy payments. (AQW 6197/09)

**The Minister of Education:** The South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that it is actively attempting to obviate compulsory redundancies for teaching staff through a transferred redundancy process; and teachers have been provided with a list of alternative posts to which they may wish to consider transferring. The Board has also written to the principals of all controlled and maintained schools in the South Eastern area about the compensation payable in the event of a teacher's redundancy and to provide contact details for advice on handling redundancy.

The Board has advised that it is actively involved directly with teaching and non-teaching staff employed in Donaghadee High School and the Trade Unions concerning the closure of the school on 31 August 2009.

Thug an Bord le fios fosta go raibh roinnt cruinnithe comhairliúcháin ann cheana féin le baill foirne agus le Ceardehumainn. Tá cruinnithe duine le duine á sceidealú le baill foirne faoi láthair.

The Board also advises that a number of consultation meetings have already taken place with staff and Trade Unions. Individual one-to-one meetings with staff are being scheduled.

### Closure of Donaghadee High School

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education what help is the South Eastern Education and Library Board offering to staff at Donaghadee High School to reduce strain and stress levels throughout this, and other, consultation processes. (AQW 6198/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá tugtha le fios ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go bhfuil siad ag déanamh idirbheartaíochta go díreach leis an fhoireann teagaisc agus neamhtheagaisc atá fostaíthe in Donaghadee High School agus leis na Ceardchumannn maidir le druidim na scoile ar 31 Lúnasa 2009.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that it is actively involved directly with teaching and non-teaching staff employed in Donaghadee High School and the Trade Unions concerning the closure of the school on 31 August 2009. Staff have been advised that the Board provides an independent one-to-one confidential counselling service and this has been made available to staff.

### Closure of Donaghadee High School

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to contact staff at Donaghadee High School in relation to the closure of the school. (AQW 6200/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá tugtha le fios dom ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go bhfuil sé ag iarraidh, ar bhonn gníomhach, iomarcaíocht éigeantach do fhoireann múinteoireachta a sheachaint trí phróiseas iomarcaíochta aistriú a chur ar fáil.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that it is actively attempting to obviate compulsory redundancies for teaching staff through a transferred redundancy process. Teachers have been provided with a list of alternative posts they may wish to consider transferring to. Staff who do not wish to be considered for a transferred redundancy will receive a redundancy payment and, if applicable, early release of pension.

As the staff at Donaghadee High School are employed by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) it is therefore a matter for that Board to consider the issues involved. However I am advised by the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the Board is actively involved directly with teaching and non teaching staff employed in Donaghadee High School and the Trade Unions concerning the closure of the school on 31 August 2009.

The Board also advises that a number of consultation meetings have already taken place with staff and Trade Unions. Individual one-to-one meetings with staff are being scheduled.

### Closure of Donaghadee High School

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education if she will ensure that staff at Donaghadee High School will receive information on their pension rights and redundancy situation, as a matter of urgency. (AQW 6213/09)

**The Minister of Education:** The South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that it is actively attempting to obviate compulsory redundancies for teaching staff through a transferred redundancy process; and teachers have been provided with a list of alternative posts to which they may wish to consider transferring. The Board has also written to the principals of all controlled and maintained schools in the South Eastern area about the compensation payable in the event of a teacher's redundancy and to provide contact details for advice on handling redundancy.

The Board has advised that it is actively involved directly with teaching and non-teaching staff employed in Donaghadee High School and the Trade Unions concerning the closure of the school on 31 August 2009.

Thug an Bord le fios fosta go raibh roinnt cruinnithe comhairliúcháin ann cheana féin le baill foirne agus le Ceardchumannn. Tá cruinnithe duine le duine á sceidealú le baill foirne faoi láthair.

The Board also advises that a number of consultation meetings have already taken place with staff and Trade Unions. Individual one-to-one meetings with staff are being scheduled.

### Closure of Donaghadee High School

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education if she will ensure that the South Eastern Education and Library Board has a policy in place for the closure of Donaghadee High School for both the staff and pupils. (AQW 6214/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá tugtha le fios dom ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go bhfuil sé ag iarraidh ar bhonn gníomhach, mar a dhéanfaidh sé i gcás dúnta scoile ar bith, iomarcaíocht éigeantach do fhoireann múinteoireachta a sheachaint trí phróiseas iomarcaíochta aistrithe a chur ar fáil.

The South-Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that it is actively attempting, as in the event of any school closure, to obviate compulsory redundancies for teaching staff through a transferred redundancy process. Teachers have been provided with a list of alternative posts they may wish to consider transferring to.

That the closure date of the school was scheduled to facilitate parents in making alternative arrangements for their children for September 2009. There are sufficient places to cater for the pupils leaving Donaghadee High School.

### Mobile Classrooms

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Education for the number of (i) children in Irish medium schools who are being taught in mobile classrooms; and (ii) mobile classrooms that are being used in the Irish medium education sector. (AQW 6222/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní choinníonn mo Roinn eolas ar líon na ndaltaí a mhúintear i seomraí ranga soghluaiste agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a fháil.

My Department does not hold information on the number of children taught in mobile classrooms and to have this collected could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. In particular in post-primary schools it would be impossible to establish how many children use the classrooms at any given time depending on the subject the classroom is used for.

Information on the number of mobile classrooms in use for teaching purposes in the different sectors is listed in the table below.

Maintained Sector	Controlled Sector	Integrated Sector	Irish Medium Sector
825	566	118	57

### Primary Schools in North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of (i) funding; and (ii) underspend returned to her Department, that was ring fenced for primary schools in North Down, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6223/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Sonraítear sa tábla thíos na méideanna imfhálaithe a dáileadh chuig bunscoileanna Dhún Thuaidh i ngach bliain le trí bliana anuas agus na méideanna nach raibh caite ag deireadh gach bliana.

The table below provides details of the ring-fenced amounts which have been allocated to North Down primary schools during each of the last three years and the amounts unspent at each year end. 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 therefore returned to my Department.

	2005-06 £000's	2006-07 £000's	2007-08 £000's
Ring-fenced Funding	7,275	5,077	5,662
Amount under spent /(overspent)	0	23	19

The above figures (with the exception of funding for extended schools) do not include ring-fenced allocations that are directly delegated from the Department to schools as a supplement to the funding determined under the Common

Funding Formula. It is not possible, or practical, to trace every individual ring-fenced fund. Rather measures are in place to ensure the services for which the funding was allocated are delivered.

### Teaching Vacancies

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Education for the number of teaching vacancies in each school, in the North Down constituency. (AQW 6224/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Faigheann an Roinn eolas ar fholúntais múinteoirí ó gach scoil dheontaschúnta ar bhonn bhliantúil.

The Department seeks information on teacher vacancies from all grant-aided schools on an annual basis. The information provides a “snapshot” of vacancies at a specific date each year. Details for the North Down parliamentary constituency are set out below:

#### NUMBER OF VACANCIES STILL TO BE FILLED DURING THE 2008/09 ACADEMIC YEAR AT 3RD NOVEMBER 2008 IN SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH DOWN PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

School name	Permanent		Temporary	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Bloomfield Road PS	2	0	0	0
Towerview PS	1	0	0	0
Kilmaine PS	1	0	0	0
Ballymagee PS	1	0	0	0
Bangor Academy and 6th Form College	1	0	1	0
St Columbanus' College	2	1	0	0
Priory College	1	0	1	0
Sullivan Upper School	0	0	1	0

### Mobile Classrooms

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Education how many (i) school children are being taught in mobile classrooms; and (ii) mobile classrooms there are in (a) the maintained sector; (b) the controlled sector; and (c) the integrated sector. (AQW 6232/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní choinníonn mo Roinn eolas ar líon na ndaltaí a mhúintear i seomraí ranga soghluaiste agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a fháil.

My Department does not hold information on the number of children taught in mobile classrooms and to have this collected could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. In particular in post-primary schools it would be impossible to establish how many children use the classrooms at any given time depending on the subject the classroom is used for.

Information on the number of mobile classrooms in use for teaching purposes in the different sectors is listed in the table below.

Maintained Sector	Controlled Sector	Integrated Sector	Irish Medium Sector
825	566	118	57

### Mobile Classrooms

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education to detail how much her Department has spent on (i) purchasing; and (ii) renting prefabricated buildings and mobile classrooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 6235/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní choinníonn mo Roinn an t-eolas seo, maidir leis na ceisteanna seo a leanas, agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a bhailiú faoi láthair.

My Department does not hold this information for the following questions and to have this collected at the present time could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. However, a review of such information is underway and this type of information will be considered as part of that review.

Information is not available in respect of the following questions:

- (i) Outstanding maintenance and repairs to mobile classrooms.
- (iii) The number of mobile classrooms being used that are older than their anticipated lifespan
- (iv) The age of mobile classrooms
- (v) The cost to my department of purchasing and renting mobile classrooms in the last five years.

Information for the total number of mobile classrooms that are being actively used in primary schools, post-primary schools and further education colleges is listed in the table below:

Primary Schools	Post-Primary Schools	FE Colleges	Total
1200	460	70	1730

### Workforce Development Strategy

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education if she intends to implement the decision of the Assembly on 26 June 2007 to introduce a transformation fund for the early years sector as a foundation for the workforce development strategy. (AQW 6247/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tugadh tacaíocht traspháirtí don phrionsabal le cistiú trasfhoirmiúcháin a bhunadh nuair a rinneadh diospóireacht air sa Thionól ar 26ú Mheitheamh 2007, faoi réir thorthaí an Athbhreithnithe ar Chaiteachais Cuimsitheach.

The principle of establishing a transformation fund received cross-party support when it was debated in the Assembly on 26th June 2007, subject to the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review. It was not possible to introduce any fund within the current Programme for Government period. Furthermore, both the Early Years 0 – 6 Strategy and the work of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) led by the Department for Employment and Learning are currently examining

the landscape of the early years workforce, including qualifications and training needs. Without their findings it is too early to say if and how any such fund should be established.

### 0-6 Early Years Strategy

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the plans to end reception classes as part of the 0-6 early years strategy. (AQW 6248/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Bhí sé mar chonclúid an Athbhreithnithe ar Oideachas Réamhscoile, a rinneadh mí Mheitheamh 2004, go dtabharfadh an Roinn reachtaíocht isteach le bac a chur ar scoileanna ag cur áiteanna fáiltithe ar fáil mar léiritear trí thaithí gur lú an tairbhe a bhaintear as soláthar fáiltithe ná mar a bhaintear as cineálacha sholáthar réamhscoile eile.

The Review of Pre-School Education undertaken in June 2004 concluded that the Department would bring forward legislation to prevent a school offering reception places as experience shows that reception provision is less beneficial than other forms of pre-school provision. The recommendations from the Review of Pre-school are being considered as part of the Early Years 0 – 6 Strategy.

## 0-6 Early Years Strategy

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of whether the 0-6 early years strategy will ensure fair funding for the voluntary and independent early years sectors. (AQW 6249/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is ceist ar a ndéanfar measúnú mar chuid den Stratéis Luath Bhlianta 0-6 í an cheist faoi chomhionannas i measc na hearnálacha reachtúla, deonacha agus pobal maidir le cistiú do sheirbhísí luath bhlianta.

The need for equity between the statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors in respect of funding for early years services is an issue that will be examined as part of the Early Years 0 - 6 Strategy. In setting a vision for early years policy the Early Years 0 – 6 Strategy will set the scene for how high quality early years services should be delivered in the next 10 years and will recognise that meaningful and sustained change will take time. The Department will be examining the costing implications for any recommendations.

## Primary-Languages Scheme

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education (i) how many; and (ii) which primary schools have employed Irish-language tutors under the primary-languages scheme. (AQW 6250/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Dheimhnigh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine an Oirdheiscirt, a riarann Clár na dTeangacha Bunscoile, go bhfuil 76 bunscoil ag baint tairbhe as teagascóirí Gaeilge tríd an chlár faoi láthair. Sonraítear na bunscoileanna seo sa tábla thíos.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board, which administers the primary-languages programme has confirmed that currently 76 primary schools are benefiting from Irish tutors through the programme. These schools are detailed in the table below.

It is for individual schools to determine the teaching staff they require to meet the needs of the pupils in their classrooms. The Department does not hold information on the number of primary schools with full-time staff employed to teach Irish or the number of such staff.

### SCHOOLS WITH AN IRISH TUTOR THROUGH THE PRIMARY-LANGUAGES PROGRAMME

All Saints Primary School, Omagh
Altayeskey Primary School, Draperstown
Ballyholland Primary School, Newry
Barnish Primary School, Ballycastle
Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint
Christ the King Primary School, Ballynahinch
Cornagogue Primary School, Enniskillen
Drumduff Primary School, Sixmilecross
Drumnabey Primary School, Castlederg
Faughanvale Primary School, Derry
Greenlough Primary School (St Mary's), Clady
Holy Cross Boys' Primary School, Belfast
Holy Family Primary School, Downpatrick
Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown
Holy Trinity Primary School, Enniskillen
Killyhommon Primary School, Enniskillen

All Saints Primary School, Omagh
Knocknagor Primary School, Trillick
Millennium Integrated Primary School, Saintfield
Mount St Catherine's Primary School, Armagh
Our Lady's Primary School, Benburb
Recarson Primary School, Omagh
Rosemount Primary School, Derry
Sacred Heart Primary School, Belfast
Sacred Heart Primary School, Newcastle
St Brendan's Primary School, Craigavon
St Brigid's Primary School, Augher
St Brigid's Primary School, Coalisland
St Brigid's Primary School, Crossmaglen
St Brigid's Primary School, Magherafelt
St Brigid's Primary School, Mountfield, Omagh
St Bronagh's Primary School, Rostrevor
St Caolan's Primary School, Ballynahinch
St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg
St Columba's Primary School, Garvagh
St Finlough's Primary School, Ballykelly
St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Keady
St Jarlath's Primary School, Blackwatertown
St Johns Primary School, Middletown
St John's Primary School, Moy
St John's Primary School, Swatragh
St Joseph's Primary School, Belfast
St Joseph's Primary School, Caledon
St Joseph's Primary School, Cookstown
St Joseph's Primary School, Drumquin
St Kevin's Primary School, Belfast
St Kieran's Primary School, Belfast
St Macnisiuis' Primary School, Tannaghmore
St Malachy's Primary School, Belfast
St Malachy's Primary School, Camlough
St Malachy's Primary School, Castlewellan
St Mary's Primary School , Aughnacloy

All Saints Primary School, Omagh
St Mary's Primary School, Ballygawley
St Mary's Primary School, Ballymagorry
St Mary's Primary School, Cushendall
St Mary's Primary School, Draperstown
St Mary's Primary School, Lurgan
St Mary's Primary School, Mullaghbawn
St Mary's Primary School, Rathfriland
St Mary's Primary School, Stewartstown
St Matthew's Primary School, Ballygawley
St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Kilmore
St Patrick's & St Joseph's Primary School, Garvagh
St Patrick's Primary School, Armagh
St Patrick's Primary School, Carrickmore
St Patrick's Primary School, Castelderg
St Patrick's Primary School, Coalisland
St Patrick's Primary School, Donaghmore
St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon
St Patrick's Primary School, Loughguile
St Patrick's Primary School, Maghera
St Patrick's Primary School, Magheralin
St Patrick's Primary School, Mayobridge
St Patrick's Primary School, Newry
St Peter's & St Paul's Primary School, Derry
St Teresa's Primary School, Sixmilecross
Tummery Primary School, Dromore

Total of 76 schools

### Primary-Languages Scheme

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education (i) how many; and (ii) which primary schools have employed Spanish language tutors under the primary-languages scheme. (AQW 6251/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Dheimhnigh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt, a riarann Clár na dTeangacha Bunscoile, go bhfuil 247 bunscoil ag baint tairbhe as teagascóirí Spáinnise tríd an chlár faoi láthair. Sonraítear na bunscoileanna seo sa tábla thíos.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board, which administers the primary-languages programme has confirmed that currently 247 primary schools are benefiting from Spanish tutors through the programme. These schools are detailed in the table below.

**SCHOOLS WITH A SPANISH TUTOR THROUGH THE PRIMARY-LANGUAGES PROGRAMME**

Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus
Alexander Dickson Primary School, Ballygowan
All Childrens Integrated Primary School, Newcastle
Ampertaine Primary School, Maghera
Anahilt Primary School, Hillsborough
Antrim Primary School
Armoy Primary School
Armstrong Primary School, Armagh
Ballinderry Primary School, Lisburn
Ballycarrickmaddy Primary School, Lisburn
Ballycarry Primary School, Carrickfergus
Ballycastle Controlled Integrated Primary School
Ballycloughan Primary School, Saintfield
Ballyhackett Primary School, Castlerock
Ballyhenry Primary School, Glengormley
Ballykeel Primary School, Ballymena
Ballylifford Primary School, Cookstown
Ballymacrickett Primary School, Crumlin
Ballynahinch Primary School
Ballynure Primary School, Ballyclare
Ballysally Primary School, Coleraine
Ballyvester Primary School, Donaghadee
Blessed Patrick O'loughran Primary School, Dungannon
Bready Jubilee Primary School, Strabane
Bridgehill Primary School, Castlederg
Broadbridge Primary School, Eglinton
Brookeborough Primary School, Enniskillen
Broughshane Primary School, Ballymena
Brownlee Primary School, Lisburn
Buick Memorial Primary School, Cullybackey
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche, Castlewellan
Bush Primary School, Dungannon
Bushmills Primary School
Carlane Primary School, Toomebridge
Carnalridge Primary School, Portrush
Carniny Primary School, Ballymena

Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus
Carnmoney Primary School, Newtownabbey
Carrickfergus Model Primary School
Carrickmannon Primary School, Newtownards
Carrowdore Primary School
Carryduff Primary School
Castledawson Primary School
Castleroe Primary School, Coleraine
Cedar Integrated Primary School, Crossgar
Christ the King Primary School, Omagh
Christ the Redeemer Primary School, Dunmurry
Clea Primary School, Armagh
Cloughoge Primary School, Newry
Cookstown Primary School
Cooley Primary School, Omagh
Cortamlet Primary School, Altnamachin, Newry
Creavery Primary School, Antrim
Crumlin Primary School
Culcrow Primary School, Aghadowey
Culnady Primary School, Maghera
Cumber Claudy Primary School, Claudy
Cumran Primary School, Clough
Damhead Primary School, Coleraine
Doagh Primary School, Ballyclare
Donacloney Primary School, Craigavon
Donaghadee Primary School
Donaghmore Primary School, Dungannon
Donegall Road Primary School, Belfast
Donemana Primary School, Strabane
Drumadonnell Primary School, Banbridge
Drumahoe Primary School, Derry
Drumard Primary School, Maghera
Dunclug Primary School, Ballymena
Duneane Primary School, Toomebridge
Dunmullan Primary School, Omagh
Dunmurry Primary School
Earlview Primary School, Newtownabbey

Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus
Ebrington Controlled Primary School, Derry
Edwards Primary School, Castelderg
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School
Envagh Primary School, Omagh
Euston Street Primary School, Belfast
Fane Street Primary School, Belfast
Forge Integrated Primary School, Belfast
Fort Hill Primary School, Lisburn
Fountain Primary School, Derry
Fourtowns Primary School, Ahoghill
Gaelscoil Eadain Mhoir, Brandywell
Gaelscoil na gCrann, Omagh
Gaelscoil na Spéiríní, Draperstown
Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, Strabane
Garryduff Primary School, Ballymoney
Glasswater Primary School , Crossgar
Glendermott Primary School, Derry
Glengormley Integrated Primary School
Glenwood Primary School, Belfast
Glynn Primary School, Larne
Good Shepherd Pr and Nursery School, Derry
Gortnagarn Primary School, Omagh
Gracehill Primary School, Ballymena
Greenisland Primary School
Groggan Primary School, Randalstown
Hardy Memorial Primary School, Armagh
Hart Memorial Primary School, Portadown
Hazelbank Primary School, Ballymena
Holy Cross Primary School, Kilkeel
Holy Family Primary School, Belfast
Holy Family Primary School, Derry
Hollywood Primary School
Howard Primary School, Dungannon
Irish Society's Primary School, Coleraine
Jonesboro' Primary School, Newry
Kells & Connor Primary School, Ballymena

Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School, Rostrevor
Kilcoan Primary School, Larne
Killowen Primary School, Lisburn
Kilmoyle Primary School, Ballymoney
Kilrea Primary School, Coleraine
Kircubbin Primary School, Newtownards
Kirkistown Primary School, Cloughey
Knockloughrim Primary School, Magherafelt
Knocknagoney Primary School, Belfast
Landhead Primary School, Ballymoney
Leaney Primary School, Ballymoney
Limavady Central Primary School
Lisbellaw Primary School, Enniskillen
Lisferty Primary School, Dungannon
Lisnadill Primary School, Armagh
Lisnasharragh Primary School, Belfast
Lissan Primary School, Cookstown
Loanends Primary School, Crumlin
Longstone Primary School, Ahoghill
Loreto Convent Primary School, Omagh
Lourdes Primary School, Whitehead
Magherafelt Controlled Primary School
Maguiresbridge Primary School, Enniskillen
Mallusk Primary School, Newtownabbey
Malvern Primary School, Belfast
Mercy Primary School, Belfast
Millstrand Integrated Primary School, Portrush
Milltown Primary School, Banbridge
Moat Primary School, Enniskillen
Moneydarragh Primary School, Newry
Mossgrove Primary School, Newtownabbey
Mossley Primary School, Newtownabbey
Mount St Michael's Primary School, Randalstown
Newbuildings Primary School, Derry
Newtownards Model Primary School
Oakfield Primary School, Carrickfergus

Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School, Derry
Olderfleet Primary School, Larne
Parkhall Primary School, Antrim
Portadown Integrated Primary School
Portaferry Integrated Primary School
Portglenone Primary School
Portrush Primary School
Portstewart Primary School
Poyntzpass Primary School
Queen Elizabeth II Primary School, Trillick, Omagh
Richmount Primary School, Portadown
Riverdale Primary School, Lisburn
Seagoe Primary School, Portadown
Seaview Primary School, Belfast
Seymour Hill Primary School, Dunmurry
Silverstream Primary School, Greenisland
Sion Mills Primary School
Spires Integrated Primary School, Magherafelt
St Aidan's Primary School Magilligan, Limavady
St Aloysius Primary School, Lisburn
St Anne's Primary School, Strabane
St Bernard's Primary School, Belfast
St Brigid's Primary School Tirkane, Maghera
St Brigid's Primary School, Ballymena
St Brigid's Primary School, Ballymoney
St Brigid's Primary School, Cloughmills
St Brigid's Primary School, Downpatrick
St Ciaran's Primary School, Cushendun
St Clare's Convent Primary School, Newry
St Colman's Abbey Primary School, Newry
St Colman's Primary School, Banbridge
St Colmcille's Primary School, Claudy
St Columbkille's Primary School, Omagh
St Columb's Primary School, Desertmartin
St Comgall's Primary School, Bangor
St Eugene's Primary School, Lisnaskea

Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus
St James' Primary School, Newtownabbey
St John Bosco Primary School Ballynease, Portglenone
St John the Baptist Boys' Primary School, Belfast
St John the Baptist Girls' Primary School, Belfast
St John's Primary School, Coalisland
St Josephs and St James Primary School, Poyntzpass
St Joseph's Primary School, Belfast
St Joseph's Primary School, Crossgar
St Joseph's Primary School, Crumlin
St Joseph's Primary School, Killeavy
St Joseph's Primary School, Killough
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn
St Joseph's Primary School, Strangford
St Macartan's Primary School, Loughinisland
St Malachy's Primary School, Newry
St Malachy's Primary School, Strangford
St Mark's Primary School, Dunmurry
St Mary's Girls' Primary School, Strabane
St Mary's on the Hill Primary School, Newtownabbey
St Mary's P S, Omagh
St Mary's Primary School, Cookstown
St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge
St Mary's Primary School, Bellaghy
St Mary's Primary School, Bellanaleck, Enniskillen
St Mary's Primary School, Claudy
St Mary's Primary School, Derrylin
St Mary's Primary School, Divis St, Belfast
St Mary's Primary School, Keady
St Mary's Primary School, Maguiresbridge, Enniskillen
St Mary's Primary School, Newcastle
St Mary's Primary School, Newtownbutler
St Mary's Primary School, Portaferry
St Mary's Primary School, Portglenone
St Mary's Primary School, Saintfield
St Mary's Primary School, Tempo, Enniskillen
St Michael's Primary School, Belfast

Acorn Integrated Primary School, Carrickfergus
St Michael's Primary School, Dromara
St Nailes Primary School, Kinawley
St Nicholas' Primary School, Carrickfergus
St Ninnidh's Primary School, Derrylin
St Olcan's Primary School, Armoy
St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Forkhill
St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Londonderry
St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle
St Patrick's Primary School Loup, Magherafelt
St Patrick's Primary School, Aughagallon, Craigavon
St Patrick's Primary School, Downpatrick
St Patrick's Primary School, Garvagh, Enniskillen
St Patrick's Primary School, Newtown Stewart
St Patrick's Primary School, Portaferry
St Patrick's Primary School, Portrush
St Patrick's Primary, Castlewellan
St Scire's Primary School, Trillick
St Teresa's Primary School, Lurgan
St Therese of Lisieux Primary School, Belfast
Straid Primary School, Ballyclare
Straidbilly Primary School, Ballymoney
Straidhavern Primary School, Crumlin
Taughmonagh Primary School, Belfast
Templepatrick Primary School
Tir-na-Nog Primary School, Ballyclare
Tobermore Primary School
Victoria Primary School, Carrickfergus
Wheatfield Primary School, Belfast
Whitehead Primary School
Whitehouse Primary School, Newtownabbey
Windsor Hill Primary School, Newry

Total of 247 schools

## Primary-Languages Scheme

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education (i) how many; and (ii) which primary schools have full time members of staff to teach Irish rather than Irish-language tutors employed under the primary-languages scheme. (AQW 6252/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Dheimhnigh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt, a riarann Clár na dTeangacha Bunscoile, go bhfuil 76 bunscoil ag baint tairbhe as teagascóirí Gaeilge tríd an chlár faoi láthair. Sonraítear na bunscoileanna seo sa tábla thíos.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board, which administers the primary-languages programme has confirmed that currently 76 primary schools are benefiting from Irish tutors through the programme. These schools are detailed in the table below.

It is for individual schools to determine the teaching staff they require to meet the needs of the pupils in their classrooms. The Department does not hold information on the number of primary schools with full-time staff employed to teach Irish or the number of such staff.

### SCHOOLS WITH AN IRISH TUTOR THROUGH THE PRIMARY-LANGUAGES PROGRAMME

All Saints Primary School, Omagh
Altayeskey Primary School, Draperstown
Ballyholland Primary School, Newry
Barnish Primary School, Ballycastle
Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint
Christ the King Primary School, Ballynahinch
Cornagague Primary School, Enniskillen
Drumduff Primary School, Sixmilecross
Drumnabey Primary School, Castlederg
Faughanvale Primary School, Derry
Greenlough Primary School (St Mary's), Clady
Holy Cross Boys' Primary School, Belfast
Holy Family Primary School, Downpatrick
Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown
Holy Trinity Primary School, Enniskillen
Killyhommon Primary School, Enniskillen
Knocknagor Primary School, Trillick
Millennium Integrated Primary School, Saintfield
Mount St Catherine's Primary School, Armagh
Our Lady's Primary School, Benburb
Recarson Primary School, Omagh
Rosemount Primary School, Derry
Sacred Heart Primary School, Belfast
Sacred Heart Primary School, Newcastle
St Brendan's Primary School, Craigavon

All Saints Primary School, Omagh
St Brigid's Primary School, Augher
St Brigid's Primary School, Coalisland
St Brigid's Primary School, Crossmaglen
St Brigid's Primary School, Magherafelt
St Brigid's Primary School, Mountfield, Omagh
St Bronagh's Primary School, Rostrevor
St Caolan's Primary School, Ballynahinch
St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg
St Columba's Primary School, Garvagh
St Finlough's Primary School, Ballykelly
St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Keady
St Jarlath's Primary School, Blackwatertown
St Johns Primary School, Middletown
St John's Primary School, Moy
St John's Primary School, Swatragh
St Joseph's Primary School, Belfast
St Joseph's Primary School, Caledon
St Joseph's Primary School, Cookstown
St Joseph's Primary School, Drumquin
St Kevin's Primary School, Belfast
St Kieran's Primary School, Belfast
St Macnisiuis' Primary School, Tannaghmore
St Malachy's Primary School, Belfast
St Malachy's Primary School, Camlough
St Malachy's Primary School, Castlewellan
St Mary's Primary School , Aughnacloy
St Mary's Primary School, Ballygawley
St Mary's Primary School, Ballymagorry
St Mary's Primary School, Cushendall
St Mary's Primary School, Draperstown
St Mary's Primary School, Lurgan
St Mary's Primary School, Mullaghbawn
St Mary's Primary School, Rathfriland
St Mary's Primary School, Stewartstown
St Matthew's Primary School, Ballygawley

All Saints Primary School, Omagh
St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Kilmore
St Patrick's & St Joseph's Primary School, Garvagh
St Patrick's Primary School, Armagh
St Patrick's Primary School, Carrickmore
St Patrick's Primary School, Castelderg
St Patrick's Primary School, Coalisland
St Patrick's Primary School, Donaghmore
St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon
St Patrick's Primary School, Loughguile
St Patrick's Primary School, Maghera
St Patrick's Primary School, Magheralin
St Patrick's Primary School, Mayobridge
St Patrick's Primary School, Newry
St Peter's & St Paul's Primary School, Derry
St Teresa's Primary School, Sixmilecross
Tummery Primary School, Dromore

Total of 76 schools

### Teachers of Irish

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what teaching and learning materials are available to teachers of Irish in English-medium primary schools. (AQW 6253/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Cuireann an Chomhairle Curaclaim, Scrúdúcháin agus Measúnaithe (CCEA) réimse ábhar ar fáil le tacaíocht a thabhairt do mhúinteoirí chun gach gné den churaclam athbhreithnithe a sholáthar, an Ghaeilge san áireamh.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) provides a range of materials to support teachers in delivering all areas of the revised curriculum, including Irish. It is for individual schools to decide which materials they use in delivering the curriculum and to determine the teaching staff they require to meet the needs of the pupils in their classrooms.

Through my primary-languages programme, teaching and learning resources are provided to support the teaching of Irish in those primary schools that have chosen to deliver Irish. In delivering the programme, Education and Boards have drawn support in providing teaching and learning resources from organisations such as CCEA, Foras na Gaeilge, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, and Gael Linn.

### Teachers of Irish

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what provision there is for initial teacher training in Irish at English-medium primary schools. (AQW 6254/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Bíonn oideachas tosaigh trí Ghaeilge do mhúinteoirí bunscoile á sholáthar ag Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire tríd an Bhaitiléir san Oideachas (BEd) agus trí chlár an Teastais Iarchéime san Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge (PGCE IME).

Initial teacher education in Irish for the primary sector is provided by St. Mary's University College through its Bachelor of Education (BEd) and Post Graduate Certificate of Education in Irish-medium education (PGCE IME) programmes.

The PGCE IME is a one-year course which is taught substantially through the medium of Irish and is intended particularly for graduates who wish to teach in Irish-medium schools. Students spend two blocks of school experience in an Irish-medium school and one block in an English-medium school.

Students who choose Irish as their main subject in the BEd programme have the opportunity to take substantial elements of the course through modules designed to support the needs of the IME sector. Students undertaking this course spend years 1 and 2 on placement in English-medium schools, and usually years 3 and 4 in Irish-medium schools.

Both qualifications enable teachers to teach in both the Irish-medium and English-medium sectors.

### Mobile Classrooms

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Education how many school children are being taught in mobile classrooms, broken down by school, in each parliamentary constituency. (AQW 6270/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní choinníonn mo Roinn eolas ar líon na ndaltaí a mhúintear i seomraí ranga soghluaiste agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a fháil.

My Department does not hold information on the number of children taught in mobile classrooms and to have this collected could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. In particular, in post-primary schools it would be impossible to establish how many children use the classrooms at any given time depending on the subject the classroom is used for.

### Young People in Residential Care

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education how much of her Department's budget is spent on young people in residential care. (AQW 6277/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní thugann an Roinn Oideachais cistiú do chúram cónaithe; ach cinntíonn sí go soláthraítear an t-oideachas do na páistí atá i suíomhanna chúram cónaithe, a fhreastalaíonn ar a gcuid riachtanas.

The Department of Education does not fund residential care as such; rather it ensures that children in residential settings are provided with education to meet their particular needs. These needs may be met within a mainstream school, a special school, alternative education provision, or a dedicated provision attached to a residential care setting.

It is, therefore, not possible to separate out expenditure on young people in residential care. The Department did however allocate £1,628k earmarked funding in 2008/09 for education provision and support for children and young people in care.

Children and young people in care have access to the full range of education services and support depending on their needs. In addition, dedicated support is available in each Education and Library Board area to assist in the preparation and implementation of a personal education plan for each young person and to work with them, their carers and schools to sustain educational placements.

### Young People in Residential Care

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education what services are provided by her Department for young people in residential care. (AQW 6278/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní thugann an Roinn Oideachais cistiú do chúram cónaithe; ach cinntíonn sí go soláthraítear an t-oideachas do na páistí atá i suíomhanna chúram cónaithe, a fhreastalaíonn ar a gcuid riachtanas.

The Department of Education does not fund residential care as such; rather it ensures that children in residential settings are provided with education to meet their particular needs. These needs may be met within

a mainstream school, a special school, alternative education provision, or a dedicated provision attached to a residential care setting.

It is, therefore, not possible to separate out expenditure on young people in residential care. The Department did however allocate £1,628k earmarked funding in 2008/09 for education provision and support for children and young people in care.

Children and young people in care have access to the full range of education services and support depending on their needs. In addition, dedicated support is available in each Education and Library Board area to assist in the preparation and implementation of a personal education plan for each young person and to work with them, their carers and schools to sustain educational placements.

### Teacher Training

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what provision there is for in-service teacher training in Irish at English-medium primary schools. (AQW 6283/09)

**The Minister of Education:** The Education and Library Boards' Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) are responsible for the continuing professional development of teachers, taking account of needs identified by school principals.

Support for Irish-medium primary schools and units is provided through the inter-board Irish-medium CASS service, managed on behalf of the five boards by the Belfast Education and Library Board. However, there is currently no specific CASS provision for Irish at English-medium schools.

Trí Chlár na dTeangacha Bunscoile áfach, bíonn teagascóirí Spáinnise agus Gaeilge ag obair taobh le múinteoirí i seomraí ranga. Mar chuid den Chlár, soláthraítear oiliúint agus tacaíocht do mhúinteoirí ó bhunscoileanna rannpháirteacha, scoileanna a chuireann an Ghaeilge ar fáil san áireamh.

My primary-languages programme does however place Spanish and Irish tutors alongside teachers in classrooms. As part of the programme, training and support is provided for teachers from participating primary schools, including schools delivering Irish.

### Youth Work

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Education how much financial support is provided by the Belfast Education and Library Board for youth work and how many (i) youth clubs; (ii) youth workers; (iii) detached youth workers; and (iv) young people are in the Belfast Education and Library Board. (AQW 6288/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Thug Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste an t-eolas seo a leanas don bhliain 2008/09:

The Chief Executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board has provided the following information for 2008/09:

Estimated financial support for youth work (£) (i)	Number of youth clubs/ units (ii)		Number of youth workers (iii)		Number of detached youth workers (iii)		Number of young people enrolled/ registered
£2,954,930	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	28,547
	24	25	33	212	12	0	

#### Notes

- (i) This relates to DE funding for the youth service, including intervention work and community relations programmes.
- (ii) This relates to youth clubs/ units registered with the Boards. Not all registered clubs/ units receive funding through the Board.
- (iii) This relates to full-time and part-time youth workers funded by the Belfast Education and Library Board from the DE youth and community relations budget.

### Mobile Classrooms

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education to detail all outstanding maintenance needed on mobile classrooms in schools including (i) the nature of repairs; and (ii) the reasons for any delays in carrying out the repairs. (AQW 6312/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní choinníonn mo Roinn an t-eolas seo, maidir leis na ceisteanna seo a leanas, agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a bhailiú faoi láthair.

My Department does not hold this information for the following questions and to have this collected at the present time could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. However, a review of such information is underway and this type of information will be considered as part of that review.

Information is not available in respect of the following questions:

- (i) Outstanding maintenance and repairs to mobile classrooms.
- (iii) The number of mobile classrooms being used that are older than their anticipated lifespan
- (iv) The age of mobile classrooms
- (v) The cost to my department of purchasing and renting mobile classrooms in the last five years.

Information for the total number of mobile classrooms that are being actively used in primary schools, post-primary schools and further education colleges is listed in the table below:

Primary Schools	Post-Primary Schools	FE Colleges	Total
1200	460	70	1730

### Mobile Classrooms

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education to outline the total number of mobile classrooms that are being actively used in all (i) primary schools and (ii) secondary schools; and (iii) further educational establishments. (AQW 6313/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní choinníonn mo Roinn an t-eolas seo, maidir leis na ceisteanna seo a leanas, agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a bhailiú faoi láthair.

My Department does not hold this information for the following questions and to have this collected at the present time could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. However, a review of such information is underway and this type of information will be considered as part of that review.

Information is not available in respect of the following questions:

- (i) Outstanding maintenance and repairs to mobile classrooms.
- (iii) The number of mobile classrooms being used that are older than their anticipated lifespan
- (iv) The age of mobile classrooms
- (v) The cost to my department of purchasing and renting mobile classrooms in the last five years.

Information for the total number of mobile classrooms that are being actively used in primary schools, post-primary schools and further education colleges is listed in the table below:

Primary Schools	Post-Primary Schools	FE Colleges	Total
1200	460	70	1730

### Mobile Classrooms

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education how many mobile classrooms are being used that are older than their anticipated lifespan. (AQW 6314/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní choinníonn mo Roinn an t-eolas seo, maidir leis na ceisteanna seo a leanas, agus bheadh costas díreireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a bhailiú faoi láthair.

My Department does not hold this information for the following questions and to have this collected at the present time could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. However, a review of such information is underway and this type of information will be considered as part of that review.

Information is not available in respect of the following questions:

- (i) Outstanding maintenance and repairs to mobile classrooms.
- (iii) The number of mobile classrooms being used that are older than their anticipated lifespan
- (iv) The age of mobile classrooms
- (v) The cost to my department of purchasing and renting mobile classrooms in the last five years.

Information for the total number of mobile classrooms that are being actively used in primary schools, post-primary schools and further education colleges is listed in the table below:

Primary Schools	Post-Primary Schools	FE Colleges	Total
1200	460	70	1730

### Mobile Classrooms

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education to provide statistics on the age of mobile classrooms in active use in schools, broken down by (i) average age (ii) the number over (a) 5 years (b) 10 years (c) 15 years (d) 20+ years old; and (iii) what is the age of the oldest mobile classroom being used. (AQW 6315/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní choinníonn mo Roinn an t-eolas seo, maidir leis na ceisteanna seo a leanas, agus bheadh costas díreireach i gceist leis an eolas seo a bhailiú faoi láthair.

My Department does not hold this information for the following questions and to have this collected at the present time could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. However, a review of such information is underway and this type of information will be considered as part of that review.

Information is not available in respect of the following questions:

- (i) Outstanding maintenance and repairs to mobile classrooms.
- (iii) The number of mobile classrooms being used that are older than their anticipated lifespan
- (iv) The age of mobile classrooms
- (v) The cost to my department of purchasing and renting mobile classrooms in the last five years.

Information for the total number of mobile classrooms that are being actively used in primary schools, post-primary schools and further education colleges is listed in the table below:

Primary Schools	Post-Primary Schools	FE Colleges	Total
1200	460	70	1730

### School Transport Assistance

**Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to outline her plans for the review of school transport assistance for (i) nursery (ii) primary and (iii) post-primary schools. (AQW 6329/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Mar a dúirt mé cheana féin sa fhreagra a tugadh do AQW 4309/09 a foilsíodh sa Tuairisc Oifigiúil ar 6 Feabhra 2009, tá sé beartaithe agam tuilleadh oibre maidir leis an athbhreithniú ar an bheartas iompair scoile a chur siar le haird a thabhairt ar shocrúithe san am atá romhainn um sholáthar oideachais iarbhunscoile agus pleanáil bunaithe sa cheantar.

As I previously advised in my answer to AQW 4309/09 published in the Official Report on 6 February 2009, I have decided to postpone any further work on the review of school transport policy to take account of future arrangements for post-primary education provision and area based planning.

When the review recommences it will cover all aspects of the current arrangements, including the definition of “suitable school”, statutory walking distance, rurality etc.

### School Transport Assistance

**Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to detail what assistance is available to low-income families who have children attending schools below the distance for school transport assistance. (AQW 6330/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Faoi láthair, ní dhéantar tástáil ar chuidiú iompair idir baile is scoile ó thaobh acmhainne de agus níl aon bhaint ioncaim leis ach oiread.

Assistance for home to school transport is not currently means tested or income related. Assistance is based solely on the statutory walking distance to a pupil’s nearest “suitable school” and there are no specific arrangements for assistance to low income families.

As previously advised a review, covering all aspects of the current home to school transport arrangements, including the present eligibility criteria, will be undertaken, to take account of future arrangements for post-primary education provision and area based planning.

### Primary Schools

**Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to detail how she intends to ensure that primary schools with fewer than 100 pupils and secondary schools with fewer than 500 pupils are not systematically closed. (AQW 6331/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá liosta de shé chritéar agus táscairí gaolmhara sa bheartas um Scoileanna Inmharthana, a foilsíodh i mí Eanáir, is féidir a úsáid nuair atá inmharthanacht oideachasúil na scoile á measúnú.

The policy on Sustainable Schools published in January lists a set of six criteria and associated indicators for use in assessing a school’s educational viability. These are:

- Quality Educational Experience
- Stable Enrolment Trends
- Sound Financial Position
- Strong Leadership and Management
- Accessibility
- Strong Links with the Community.

Stable Enrolment Trends criterion which sets out minimum enrolment thresholds as follows:-

School Type	Enrolment
Rural Primary	105
Urban Primary	140
Post-primary	500*
6th Form	100

\* excluding 6th form provision

Pupil numbers are clearly an important factor in assessing future viability but schools will not be closed simply because they fall below these thresholds. They will be reviewed against all six criteria with each case being considered on its individual circumstances. The overriding consideration will be the quality of education that a school provides for the children.

### Teacher Pensions

**Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to detail what plans she has to ensure teachers who have to retire prematurely through inefficiency or poor health receive their pensions. (AQW 6332/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is féidir múinteoirí dul ar scoir anabái ar fhoras iomarcaíochta nó ar mhaithe le feidhmiú éifeachtach an fhostóra.

Teachers may be retired prematurely on the grounds of redundancy or in the interests of the efficient discharge of the employers' function. My Department is currently consulting on draft regulations which would have the effect of making teachers' employers liable for the cost of premature retirement compensation, including the additional cost arising from the immediate payment of unreduced pension benefits. The draft regulations also provide employers with discretion to make an enhanced severance payment as an alternative to granting premature retirement compensation.

No changes are planned in respect of the ill-health benefits payable under the Teachers' Pension Scheme. The Scheme provides for pension to be paid to teachers who have to retire before normal pension age due to illness or injury and who have provided medical evidence that their illness permanently prevents them from teaching.

### Departmental Accounts

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Education (i) to outline the process by which her Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits her Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail her Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6351/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Iniúchtar cuntais na Roinne de réir an Government Resources and Accounts Act (NI) 2001.

1. The Department's accounts are audited in accordance with the Government Resources and Accounts Act (NI) 2001.
2. The Department's accounts are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) of the Audit Office (NIAO).
3. The Department's final audited accounts in each of the last three years were laid in the Assembly and copies are available in the Assembly Library or on the Department of Education website (refer to the attached link for the Departmental accounts for the last three years - [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-about-the-dept/24-about\\_the\\_department-resource\\_accounts\\_pg/24-about\\_the\\_department-resource\\_accounts-annual\\_accounts\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-about-the-dept/24-about_the_department-resource_accounts_pg/24-about_the_department-resource_accounts-annual_accounts_pg.htm)).

### School Boards of Governors

**Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Education to detail the duties as set out in legislation, of a Board of Governors of a school. (AQW 6353/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an iliomad dualgas reachtúil ag Boird Gobhanóirí, agus tá na dualgais seo leagtha síos i reachtaíocht phríomhúil fhairsing agus i bhfóreachtaíocht fhadréimseach.

Boards of Governors have very many statutory duties which are set down in a wide range of primary and subordinate legislation.

The main statutory duties of a school Board of Governors are:

- to prepare and from time to time revise a school development plan in accordance with regulated requirements and taking account of the findings of any school inspection report;
- to determine, and keep under review, its policy in relation to the curriculum for the school and to make, and keep up to date, a written statement of that policy;
- to facilitate the implementation of the revised curriculum;
- to ensure proper provision for pupils with special educational needs;
- to manage the school's finances in accordance with a financial memorandum;

- to determine the school's staff complement, to select & appoint staff and to manage employment issues including staff conduct, discipline and grievance procedures;
- to set performance objectives for the principal within the Performance Review and Staff Development Scheme;
- to safeguard and promote the welfare and protection of pupils;
- to set general principles on good behaviour and pupil conduct and participate in pupil disciplinary procedures;
- to provide information for parents about the school and the performance of their children;
- to agree and apply criteria for pupil admissions; and
- to oversee the use and maintenance of the school premises;

The Board of Governors is responsible for the management of the school for which it is appointed. It must exercise its responsibilities in accordance with a scheme of management for the school and such other schemes as are approved by my Department.

### Cultural Rights of Children

**Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Education who is responsible for ensuring that the cultural rights of children are implemented in each school. (AQW 6354/09)

**The Minister of Education:** The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international human rights treaty that recognises and protects the human rights of children. The convention requires all state parties to report to the UN Committee their progress against the convention. Articles 29 of the Convention deals with "cultural identity". Education legislation and my Department's education policies and strategies are designed to take account of the aims of education as enshrined in Article 29 of the convention.

It is the duty of a Board of Governors to facilitate the implementation of the statutory revised curriculum. The revised curriculum which I am currently introducing provides opportunities for pupils to explore issues relating to rights and responsibilities. Pupils will look at ways of promoting inclusion, diversity, respect for others and reconciliation. It is the duty of Boards of Governors of a school to determine and keep under review the school's policy in relation to the curriculum, including its range and balance.

Agus iad ag socrú a mbeartas féin, ba chóir do scoileanna aird a thabhairt ar chearta daonna agus ar reachtaíocht comhionannais. Is féidir le Boird Ghobharnóirí comhairle a fháil ón Roinn, ó na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne agus ón Choimisiún um Chearta Daonna faoin tionchar a bhíonn ag cearta daonna agus ag reachtaíocht comhionannais ar scoileanna.

Schools, when determining their own policies should have regard to human rights and equality legislation. Boards of Governors can obtain advice from the Department, the Education and Library Boards and the Human Rights Commission as to how human rights and equality legislation impacts on schools.

### Cultural Rights of Children

**Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Education what is the role of the Board of Governors in a school in ensuring that the cultural rights of that school's children are implemented. (AQW 6355/09)

**The Minister of Education:** The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international human rights treaty that recognises and protects the human rights of children. The convention requires all state parties to report to the UN Committee their progress against the convention. Articles 29 of the Convention deals with "cultural identity". Education legislation and my Department's education policies and strategies are designed to take account of the aims of education as enshrined in Article 29 of the convention.

It is the duty of a Board of Governors to facilitate the implementation of the statutory revised curriculum. The revised curriculum which I am currently introducing provides opportunities for pupils to explore issues relating to rights and responsibilities. Pupils will look at ways of promoting inclusion, diversity, respect for others and reconciliation. It is the duty of Boards of Governors of a school to determine and keep under review the school's policy in relation to the curriculum, including its range and balance.

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Schools, when determining their own policies should have regard to human rights and equality legislation. Boards of Governors can obtain advice from the Department, the Education and Library Boards and the Human Rights Commission as to how human rights and equality legislation impacts on schools.

### Closure of Donaghadee High School

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education how many teachers employed at Donaghadee High School have attained other teaching posts after the closure of the school this summer. (AQW 6366/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Go dtí seo, tá post eile múinteoireachta faighte ag beirt mhúinteoirí ó Donaghadee High School.

To date two teachers from Donaghadee High School have secured alternative teaching posts.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) is currently seeking to secure alternative employment for teachers in Donaghadee High School and have provided the teachers with a list of alternative posts to which they may wish to consider transferring. The SEELB will continue with these efforts up to the date of the school closure.

### Capital Investments

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education what capital investments are proposed for (i) Devenish College, Enniskillen; (ii) Portora Royal School, Enniskillen; (iii) Collegiate Grammar School, Enniskillen; (iv) Lisnaskea High School, Lisnaskea; and to clarify when these investments will be implemented. (AQW 6374/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Fôgraíodh íocaíocht maidir le hathsholáthar ar Devinish College roimhe seo. Faoi láthair, níl móroibreacha nó tionscadail faofa ar bith ann a bhaineann leis na scoileanna eile thuasluaite.

A payout for the replacement of Devenish College was announced previously. There are currently no approved major works/projects for the other schools identified. The Western Education and Library Board and the Department are currently working with the post-primary schools towards reaching a consensus on how best to meet the future needs of the pupils in the area. Discussions are aimed at reaching an agreed way forward which would support future investment decisions.

### Creative Youth Partnerships

**Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education what support her Department has given to Creative Youth Partnerships and what support she plans to make in the 2009/2010 financial year. (AQW 6394/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Cuirim tábhacht mór ar chumas na ndaoine óga a fhorbairt ó thaobh cruthaíochta agus nuálaíochta de, ag tabhairt cuidiú dóibh bheith muiníneach agus fiontraíoch san am atá le teacht.

I place great importance on developing young people's capacity for creativity and innovation, helping them to develop as confident individuals and entrepreneurs of the future.

Creative Youth Partnerships has been operating as a pilot since 2004/05 and since that date my Department has contributed £450k to the Programme.

At my Department's request, Creative Youth Partnerships has recently produced proposals for a mainstreaming strategy for the years beyond 2008/09, and these proposals have now been considered.

Looking ahead, a key challenge for my Department is to ensure that creativity and innovation is mainstreamed as a natural part of the planning and delivery of the revised curriculum. In that context I am making available £50k to support the Programme in the 2009/10 financial year.

### Ballywalter Primary School

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education when the newbuild for Ballywalter Primary School will start, following the economic approval. (AQW 6399/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl amscála i gceist don chéad babhta eile de leithdháileadh caipitil mar sin ní féidir a rá faoi láthair cén uair a thosóidh obair ar scoil athsholáthair do Ballywalter Primary School.

There is currently no timeframe for the next capital allocations and it is, therefore, not possible to advise at this stage when work on a replacement school for Ballywalter Primary School would commence.

D'aithin Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt scéim caipitil ionchasach do Londonderry Primary School.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) has identified a potential capital scheme for Londonderry Primary School. The Department has requested further information from the SEELB in regard to the proposed scheme and primary-school provision in the wider Newtownards area. An economic appraisal has not been received by the Department.

Faoi láthair, is ábhair breithnithe idir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt agus an Roinn Oideachais iad na roghanna sa Bhreithmheas Eacnamaíochta um scéim caipitil mhóroibreacha do Killinchy Primary School.

The options in the Economic Appraisal for a major works capital scheme for Killinchy Primary School are currently the subject of consideration between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the Department.

### Londonderry Primary School

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education to provide details of the newbuild for Londonderry Primary School in the Glen Estate, Newtownards, and to confirm if the business plan has been completed. (AQW 6400/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl amscála i gceist don chéad babhta eile de leithdháileadh caipitil mar sin ní féidir a rá faoi láthair cén uair a thosóidh obair ar scoil athsholáthair do Ballywalter Primary School.

There is currently no timeframe for the next capital allocations and it is, therefore, not possible to advise at this stage when work on a replacement school for Ballywalter Primary School would commence.

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The options in the Economic Appraisal for a major works capital scheme for Killinchy Primary School are currently the subject of consideration between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the Department.

### Killinchy Primary School

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education to detail the position for Killinchy Primary School, now that the economic approval has been given. (AQW 6401/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl amscála i gceist don chéad babhta eile de leithdháileadh caipitil mar sin ní féidir a rá faoi láthair cén uair a thosóidh obair ar scoil athsholáthair do Ballywalter Primary School.

There is currently no timeframe for the next capital allocations and it is, therefore, not possible to advise at this stage when work on a replacement school for Ballywalter Primary School would commence.

D'aithin Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt scéim caipitil ionchasach do Londonderry Primary School.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) has identified a potential capital scheme for Londonderry Primary School. The Department has requested further information from the SEELB in regard to the proposed scheme and primary-school provision in the wider Newtownards area. An economic appraisal has not been received by the Department.

Faoi láthair, is ábhair breithnithe idir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt agus an Roinn Oideachais iad na roghanna sa Bhreithmheas Eacnamaíochta um scéim caipitil mhóroibreacha do Killinchy Primary School.

The options in the Economic Appraisal for a major works capital scheme for Killinchy Primary School are currently the subject of consideration between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the Department.

### University Students

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Education how many students from schools in the Southern Education and Library Board area attended universities in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the rest of the United Kingdom; (c) the Republic of Ireland; (d) other EU countries; and (e) other non-EU countries over the last 3 years. (AQW 6431/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhormaid a iarradh. Baileofar an t-eolas seo mar chuid den chéad áireamh eile a bhaineann le lucht fágála scoile.

The data is not available in the format required at this present time. I have asked for this to be collected with the next school leavers census.

### University Students

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Education how many students from schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area attended universities in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the rest of the United Kingdom; (c) the Republic of Ireland; (d) other EU countries; and (e) other non-EU countries over the last 3 years. (AQW 6435/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhormaid a iarradh. Baileofar an t-eolas seo mar chuid den chéad áireamh eile a bhaineann le lucht fágála scoile.

The data is not available in the format required at this present time. I have asked for this to be collected with the next school leavers census.

### University Students

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education how many students from schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area are attended universities in (a) Northern Ireland; (b) the rest of the United Kingdom; (c) the Republic of Ireland; (d) other EU countries; and (e) other non-EU countries over the last 3 years. (AQW 6440/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhormaid a iarradh. Baileofar an t-eolas seo mar chuid den chéad áireamh eile a bhaineann le lucht fágála scoile.

The data is not available in the format required at this present time. I have asked for this to be collected with the next school leavers census.

## DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

### Distribution of Department Publications

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6107/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** When distributing reports and consultation documents, my officials comply with the requirements of the NICS-wide “Guidance on Distribution of Departmental Publications and Consultation Documents”. This document prescribes who should receive various categories of publications, as well as the format and the number of copies to be issued.

Accordingly, MLAs are normally alerted to DEL publications by means of the ‘papers presented’ list at the Assembly. Where appropriate, for example in relation to consultation documents, MLAs also receive a letter informing them where they might access an electronic version of the document and giving them the opportunity to request a hard copy if desired. With regard to the Employment and Learning Committee, my officials send almost all papers by e-mail.

Such an approach is consistent with my Department’s Green Policy, which states that “Where possible, the use of hard copies for external contacts and customers should be avoided if forms and/or publications can be distributed by e-mail or CD-Rom, or downloaded via the corporate website”.

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what are the (i) projects; and (ii) amounts of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6164/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Department for Employment and Learning has one capital project under construction in the North Down constituency. The project, in the further education sector, is to provide a Centre for Performing Arts, Technology and Innovation, and to carry out refurbishment at the Bangor campus of the South Eastern Regional College. The project, with a capital value of £13.4m, is planned to be delivered over three years. Project costs in 2009/10 are expected to amount to £2.1m, with a further £8.2m spend estimated for 2010/11.

### First Year Students

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many first year students (i) drop out; (ii) switch courses; and (iii) drop out and are in receipt of (a) loans; (b) grants; or (c) bursaries; (AQW 6175/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:**

- (i) Of those full-time undergraduate entrants to NI Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 2005/06, 1,175 were no longer in Higher Education (HE) in 2006/07. Some of these entrants may return to HE at a later stage, however, the Department does not hold this information.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

1. Figure has been rounded to the nearest 5.
  2. The latest data on those no longer in HE are for those entering in 2005/06 and are available only for full-time undergraduate entrants.
- (ii) The Department does not hold information relating to students that switch courses.
- (iii) Of those full-time undergraduate NI domiciled and eligible EU approved applicants (supported by NI) for student support in 2007/08, 920 withdrew from Higher Education and were in receipt of statutory support in the form of loans, grants, or bursaries.

Source: Student Loans Company (SLC)

Notes:

1. Latest available data are for 2007/08 academic year.

2. The data which SLC provide to my Department relates to applications made by students supported by Northern Ireland as opposed to those at the institutional level reported by HESA in part i) above. On that basis and given the different academic years reported, the SLC data and the HESA data cannot be compared.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 10.
4. Providing a breakdown by loans, grants or bursaries separately is very complex and could only be provided at disproportionate costs.
5. Eligible EU approved applicants are only eligible to apply for tuition fee loans.

### First Year Students

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many first year students drop out and do not return to higher education. (AQW 6176/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Of the 9,990 full-time undergraduate entrants to NI Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 2005/06, 1,175 were no longer in Higher Education in the following year. It is not possible to determine from the datasets held by the Department whether these students do or not return in later years.

Source: 2006/07 Performance Indicators, Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes:

1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5
2. The latest available data on students no longer in HE are for those entering Higher Education in 2005/06 and this is only captured for full-time entrants.

### Construction Industry Training Board

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) for an update on the review of the Construction Industry Training Board and (ii) to indicate when the final report will be published. (AQW 6204/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Deloitte Consultants have been appointed to conduct this review which is now well underway. The final report is expected to be received by the Department by 30 June 2009.

### Capital Infrastructure Projects

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning in relation to capital infrastructure projects in the East Londonderry constituency, (i) to list all these projects; and (ii) to breakdown the aggregated value of each project that is (a) under construction; (b) in the procurement process; or (c) to be advertised, in financial year 2009/2010. (AQW 6211/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Funding of £1.3 million has been allocated to the Department for Employment and Learning under the Critical Sector Initiatives Budget. This money will be used to support investment in the capacity of the Northern Ireland Further Education Sector to deliver high quality training in areas of significant importance to the local economy. While final allocations have yet to be made, it is possible, but not certain, that some of the funding could be available within the East Londonderry constituency.

(i) The following projects will be carried out by the University of Ulster at its Coleraine campus:

Project	Value £
High Voltage Replacement	3,325,000
Combined Heat and Power	440,000
Wind Turbines	2,375,000

Project	Value £
Diamond Refurbishment	2,200,000
Total	8,340,000

(ii) (a) Under Construction.  
Nil.

(ii) (b) In the Procurement Process.  
Diamond Refurbishment - advertised on 1st March 2009. (£2,200,000)

(ii) (c) To be advertised in FY 2009/10.  
High Voltage Replacement to be advertised on 1st Nov 2009. (£3,325,000)

**Note:** The Combined Heat and Power and the Wind Turbines projects will have feasibility studies carried out during 2009/10.

### Higher Education Statistics Agency

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the cost per full-time equivalent student, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, for each of the institutions providing initial teacher education for the academic years 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQW 6468/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The expenditure per full-time equivalent student, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, for each of the institutions providing initial teacher education for the academic years 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 are given in the table below: -

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
The Queen's University of Belfast	10,668	11,585	12,373	13,076
St Mary's University College	5,787	6,957	7,217	8,133
Stranmillis University College	6,813	7,634	7,269	9,012
University of Ulster	7,169	7,775	8,425	9,130

It should be noted that the figures in the table above relate to students on all courses and not just those studying Initial Teacher Education.

### Higher Education Statistics Agency

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total costs, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, for each of the institutions providing initial teacher education for the academic years 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQW 6470/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The total expenditure (£000s), according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, for each of the institutions providing initial teacher education for the academic years 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 is given in the table below:-

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
The Queen's University of Belfast	180,981	198,686	214,258	229,222
St Mary's University College	5,978	6,936	7,376	8,279
Stranmillis University College	8,026	9,008	8,403	10,409
University of Ulster	144,920	155,258	164,300	170,973

It should be noted that the figures in the table above relate to the total costs of each university/university college and not just those elements related to Initial Teacher Education.

## Higher Education Statistics Agency

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of full-time equivalent students, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, at each of the institutions providing initial teacher education for the academic years 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07. (AQW 6471/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The total number of full-time equivalent students, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, at each of the institutions providing initial teacher education for the academic years 2003/04, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 is given in the table below: -

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
The Queen's University of Belfast	16,965	17,150	17,316	17,530
St Mary's University College	1,033	997	1,022	1,018
Stranmillis University College	1,178	1,180	1,156	1,155
University of Ulster	20,215	19,970	19,501	18,726

It should be noted that the figures in the table above relate to all Full Time Equivalent students and not just those studying Initial Teacher Education.

## DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

### People Registered as Unemployed

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people are registered as unemployed in (i) Ballymoney District Council; (ii) Ballymena District Council; and (iii) Moyle District Council, currently and for the same period in 2008. (AQW 4874/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster):** At January 2009, Ballymoney District Council Area (DCA) had 700 claimant count unemployed persons (558 males and 142 females), which corresponded to 3.8% of persons of working age. One year previously (January 2008), the count was 371 claimants (283 males and 88 females) which corresponded to 2.0% of persons of working age.

Ballymena DCA had 1,092 claimant count unemployed persons (847 males and 245 females), which corresponded to 2.9% of persons of working age. One year previously (January 2008), the count was 607 claimants (442 males and 165 females) which corresponded to 1.6% of persons of working age.

Moyle DCA had 507 claimant count unemployed persons (399 males and 108 females), which corresponded to 5.0% of persons of working age. One year previously (January 2008), the count was 300 claimants (227 males and 73 females) which corresponded to 3.0% of persons of working age.

### Tourism

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with her counterparts in Scotland to improve tourism, with particular reference to sea links to Larne. (AQW 4917/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I have had no discussion with my Scottish counterparts in relation to sea links to Larne but I am well aware that these links are of significant tourism value to Northern Ireland, particularly in realising the full potential of our Causeway Coast and Glens signature project.

Tourism Ireland promotes Northern Ireland extensively across Scotland as part of its global destination marketing campaign and also through specific, additional marketing campaigns which it undertakes for Northern Ireland throughout Great Britain. This activity highlights specific, compelling reasons to visit Northern Ireland, demonstrates ease of access by sea and air and showcases the good value fares and compelling offers provided by local industry partners.

Tourism Ireland continues to work closely with air and sea carriers who serve Northern Ireland, helping to stimulate demand in key source markets overseas. Tourism Ireland works with sea carriers such as P&O Lines and Stena Line to promote ferry routes from Troon and Cairnryan to Larne and from Stranraer to Belfast. Tourism Ireland also works with airlines such as Ryanair to promote flights from Glasgow to Belfast and City of Derry Airport.

All this activity will continue throughout 2009, in conjunction with industry partners and with air and sea carriers.

### Chicken Waste Plant at Glenavy

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the (i) planning application for a chicken waste plant at Glenavy; and (ii) request by Rose Energy for public money for its proposals.

(AQW 6159/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** In response to part (i) this is a planning matter and does not come under my remit.

In response to part (ii) above, the company originally applied to the DETI administered Environment and Renewable Energy Fund for funding of £16million. This application was not approved, however, and the consortium subsequently approached Invest NI for support.

Without prejudice to the planning process, Invest NI is currently involved in negotiations with Rose Energy regarding the case for assistance towards project costs. The case will be subject to Invest NI's normal appraisal and approval procedures.

### Unemployed 17-19 Year Olds

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide figures for the number of unemployed people who are aged 17-19 years old, broken down by gender.

(AQW 6160/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** At February 2009 there were 4,600 claimant count unemployed persons aged 17 -19 years old in Northern Ireland (3,210 males and 1,390 females). This represents 10.5% of total claimants in Northern Ireland (9.2% of male claimants and 15.7% of female claimants).

For information, the Northern Ireland claimant count at February 2009 was 43,627 (34,796 males and 8,831 females). This figure is not adjusted for seasonality.

### Invest NI

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the representation; and (ii) how many members of the top management tiers of Invest NI are from the North West.

(AQW 6170/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** No Invest NI staff at senior management level (Director and above) are based in the North-West Regional Office. No members of the senior management team currently reside in the North-West, although two are natives of the area.

### HR Connect

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many queries has HR Connect received since its introduction; and if the reference number allocated to each person reflects this. (AQW 6202/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**

- 1) This information is not fully available broken down by department. Specifically, departmental statistics are not available for telephone calls received by HR Connect. However, HR Connect has provided the following:

Number of e-mails received since December 2007 from a DETI e-mail account\*: = 2,354

\* Includes HSENI staff.

- 2) The unique reference number is automatically generated by the HR Connect system, and is not related to the number of queries received by HRConnect. If HR Connect deals with a query as a 'Service Request', then a Service Request number is allocated sequentially, but not by department. Not all e-mails or phone calls result in a Service Request.

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the (i) projects; and (ii) amount of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6267/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** DETI has three capital investment projects planned specifically for the North Down constituency in this period.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is investing £0.4million in projects at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, North Down Museum and Bangor Abbey during 2010-11.

There are also Telecoms infrastructure projects planned on a Northern Ireland wide basis totalling £6.5million in 2009-10 and £6.4million in 2010-11, which could potentially include the North Down constituency.

### TradeLinks Programme

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on approval of funding for the TradeLinks programme. (AQW 6274/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** An application seeking INTERREG IVA funding for the Tradelinks II Programme has been submitted to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

The detail of the application is currently under consideration by SEUPB as the overall Managing Authority of the Programme, DETI as the Northern Ireland Accountable Department, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) as the Republic of Ireland Accountable Department.

### Project Kelvin

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm that the Project Kelvin 'Telehouse', to be sited in Londonderry/Derry, will be the primary connectivity point for the trans-Atlantic cable, and not Coleraine. (AQW 6383/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Hibernia Atlantic has indicated its intention to submit a formal request, jointly to DETI and The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) in the Republic of Ireland, seeking a variation to the Project Kelvin contract awarded by the two Departments to facilitate a relocation of the Telehouse from Coleraine to Londonderry City, with a cable landing station in Coleraine. Both Departments have indicated their approval in principle to accede to this request, subject to the technical re-design being compliant with the original Invitation to Tender (ITT). The Company is now revising their technical design to give effect to this change. This re-design is likely to take several weeks and it would not be appropriate for my Department, or DCENR, to become involved in this re-design process or to comment at this stage.

Once complete, Hibernia Atlantic will submit their revised proposal to the two Departments. This will be considered by the joint DETI/DCENR Kelvin Project Board. The Departments will seek independent technical advice on the re-design proposal to ensure the re-design complies with the specifications of the original ITT. In due course the Project Board will make a recommendation through the respective Departments to me and the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland.

### Invest NI

**Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance has been provided by Invest NI to Visteon's manufacturing plant in Belfast, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6473/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI maintains regular contact with Visteon, the most recent meetings having taken place on 23 February 2009 and 19 March 2009. The possibility of offering support for Research and Development, marketing and training assistance has been explored recently. Invest NI remains in contact with Visteon management both locally and nationally.

In the last three years no projects seeking financial assistance have been presented to Invest NI by Visteon UK Ltd's Belfast operation and consequently no financial assistance has been provided in the same period.

### Visteon Plant in Belfast

**Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what action her Department is taking to sustain manufacturing jobs at Visteon's plant in Belfast. (AQW 6498/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI maintains regular contact with Visteon having met with Visteon UK's Managing Director Steve Gawne in London in February 2009 and more recently the local management team on the 19 March 2009 to discuss the current market issues.

As a result they are currently exploring opportunities for Research & Development, Marketing and Training assistance with the local Visteon management team.

### Visteon Plant in Belfast

**Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what communication she has had with the management of (i) Visteon; and (ii) Ford about the future of Visteon's manufacturing plant in Belfast. (AQW 6499/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I have not directly met with the management team of Visteon. However, officials from Invest NI met with Visteon UK on 23 February 2009 in London and with the local management team on 19 March 2009. These negotiations are focused on the future of Visteon's operations in Belfast.

All communication is through Visteon UK as it is the Parent company and has assumed all assets and liabilities of the Belfast facility. Ford are the company's sole customer and, as such, no direct contact has been made with them.

## DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

### Community and Voluntary Sector

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment how much money was provided by each of the local councils in grant aid to the community and voluntary sector, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5207/09)

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** Grant-aid to the community and voluntary sector, provided by district councils in each of the last five years, is detailed in the table below.

#### GRANT-AID FOR THE COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Antrim	134,421	123,544	203,464	236,371	211,724
Ards	93,592	119,255	131,336	143,825	145,473
Armagh	208,111	169,597	207,485	218,012	351,075
Ballymena	96,624	169,389	139,288	162,425	133,132
Ballymoney	54,859	59,330	52,842	41,750	44,173

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Banbridge	172,642	232,575	376,106	277,543	298,716
Belfast	1,485,395	1,699,054	2,029,758	2,225,820	2,343,431
Carrickfergus	107,662	98,255	103,186	102,840	130,841
Castlereagh	7,482	13,440	116,823	13,611	4,664
Coleraine	98,244	106,548	166,970	216,562	324,081
Cookstown	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000	15,000
Craigavon	158,579	175,942	219,408	296,960	308,386
Derry	848,434	759,340	785,818	800,007	906,570
Down	165,944	136,137	174,928	240,682	277,346
Dungannon and South Tyrone	187,128	238,196	347,541	352,588	326,342
Fermanagh	182,208	185,395	198,433	222,782	208,093
Larne	58,285	51,975	114,624	136,590	190,329
Limavady	309,986	222,114	68,324	91,879	151,559
Lisburn	182,227	209,134	281,912	378,552	483,617
Magherafelt	86,554	103,319	102,584	128,788	146,831
Moyle	26,490	23,048	26,585	32,726	42,520
Newry and Mourne	0	1,071,000	724,000	671,000	986,000
Newtownabbey	218,067	240,151	318,943	377,369	497,429
North Down	114,188	125,172	133,465	185,608	183,857
Omagh	470,476	421,728	442,573	463,284	536,492
Strabane	356,601	350,779	364,884	323,113	391,294
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,839,199</b>	<b>7,119,417</b>	<b>7,846,280</b>	<b>8,355,687</b>	<b>9,638,975</b>

### Community and Voluntary Sector

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment how much money was provided by each of the local councils to the community and voluntary sector for the provision of sports and leisure facilities, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5208/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Funds provided by district councils to the community and voluntary sector for the provision of sports and leisure facilities, in each of the last five years, are detailed in the table below.

#### SPORTS AND LEISURE FACILITIES FOR COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Antrim	20,000	20,000	20,000	30,000	40,000
Ards	0	0	0	0	0
Armagh	36,000	12,000	9,800	14,450	7,500
Ballymena	23,202	66,540	66,182	64,760	48,086

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	23,802	58,430	155,855	161,568	100,390
Belfast	114,230	197,593	163,005	247,058	251,909
Carrickfergus	0	0	0	0	10,000
Castlereagh	0	1,000	0	0	0
Coleraine	0	0	30,000	30,000	120,000
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	37,141	37,844	51,878	71,747	62,534
Derry	71,982	66,267	68,465	86,170	101,637
Down	44,500	400	500	6,500	56,000
Dungannon and South Tyrone	0	0	37,500	32,000	8,725
Fermanagh	0	0	0	0	0
Larne	12,684	12,623	26,207	26,934	33,365
Limavady	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn	0	0	7,500	7,200	0
Magherafelt	1,500	0	900	900	900
Moyle	8,600	4,000	4,100	3,000	4,900
Newry and Mourne	0	81,000	58,000	45,000	270,000
Newtownabbey	24,269	28,298	40,387	43,321	49,935
North Down	0	0	0	0	0
Omagh	326,675	268,470	249,538	283,632	327,799
Strabane	193,750	146,630	127,700	81,328	102,280
<b>Total</b>	<b>938,335</b>	<b>1,001,095</b>	<b>1,117,517</b>	<b>1,235,568</b>	<b>1,595,960</b>

### Sports and Leisure Facilities

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment how much money was spent by each of the local councils for capital investment, for (i) new; or (ii) replacement sports and leisure facilities, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5209/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Expenditure incurred by district councils on capital investment for new and replacement sports and leisure facilities, in each of the last five years, is detailed in the tables below.

#### NEW SPORTS AND LEISURE FACILITIES

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Antrim	8,853	75,060	426,717	364,391	194,843
Ards	0	0	0	0	439,000
Armagh	101,175	1,289,988	290,143	489,698	319,865
Ballymena	0	301,724	422,413	482,757	424,904

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Ballymoney	52,720	41,319	1,449,126	457,226	330,493
Banbridge	38,835	118,062	83,045	39,551	389,427
Belfast	1,466,404	5,727,944	3,109,015	7,517,945	8,414,177
Carrickfergus	68,052	97,103	0	0	211,308
Castlereagh	219,059	32,005	153,456	13,438	82,903
Coleraine	184,783	147,893	0	84,361	101,445
Cookstown	2,506,091	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	0	0	0	0	399,246
Derry	168,779	692,704	515,906	476,381	1,713,794
Down	0	0	0	0	0
Dungannon and South Tyrone	0	0	0	0	0
Fermanagh	922,008	418,743	440,669	85,969	0
Larne	0	278,073	293,051	205,001	150,883
Limavady	0	50,618	108,623	35,409	135,573
Lisburn	0	12,000	561,000	235,000	514,000
Magherafelt	97,449	46,857	0	3,078,002	2,855,288
Moyle	1,080	49,809	821,230	54,543	49,785
Newry and Mourne	0	0	0	35,000	206,000
Newtownabbey	461,829	318,414	346,346	146,407	594,562
North Down	0	0	85,058	544,126	208,099
Omagh	0	0	0	0	0
Strabane	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,297,117</b>	<b>9,698,316</b>	<b>9,105,798</b>	<b>14,345,205</b>	<b>17,735,595</b>

**REPLACEMENT SPORTS AND LEISURE FACILITIES**

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Antrim	4,976	757	217,293	0	0
Ards	0	0	76,761	148,251	0
Armagh	0	0	95,065	1,194,618	263,806
Ballymena	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymoney	7,182	180,366	91,483	214,846	518,252
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	948	0	0	485,179	86,106
Carrickfergus	6,303	0	428	154,044	1,854,710
Castlereagh	0	0	0	0	0
Coleraine	409,564	65,784	0	12,718	0
Cookstown	0	0	0	0	0

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Craigavon	0	0	0	0	0
Derry	112,608	95,186	183,235	0	0
Down	0	0	0	0	0
Dungannon and South Tyrone	0	0	0	0	0
Fermanagh	208,132	63,790	116,721	89,813	44,878
Larne	109,240	50,828	43,081	102,318	71,851
Limavady	0	0	0	0	30,002
Lisburn	0	0	0	0	185,000
Magherafelt	133,111	152,151	17,100	0	25,512
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0
Newry and Mourne	0	0	0	0	0
Newtownabbey	212,991	745	66,204	9,232	164,568
North Down	0	0	0	0	0
Omagh	0	0	0	0	0
Strabane	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,205,055</b>	<b>609,607</b>	<b>907,371</b>	<b>2,411,019</b>	<b>3,244,685</b>

### Sports and Leisure Facilities

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment how much money was spent by each district council, for capital investment associated with refurbishment, modernisation or improvement of existing sports and leisure facilities, in each of the last five years. (AQW 5210/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Expenditure incurred by district councils on capital investment associated with the refurbishment, modernisation or improvement of existing sports and leisure facilities, in each of the last five years, is detailed in the table below.

#### REFURBISHMENT, MODERNISATION OR IMPROVEMENT OF SPORTS AND LEISURE FACILITIES

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Antrim	0	0	4,116,164	120,757	176,079
Ards	375,772	83,821	60,242	157,864	362,445
Armagh	975,144	251,350	351,943	774,980	2,170,602
Ballymena	637,324	52,516	425,827	0	484,404
Ballymoney	109,534	25,634	255,186	149,270	578,594
Banbridge	127,412	392,976	555,140	936,686	1,479,142
Belfast	590,612	398,500	198,739	6,223	25,241
Carrickfergus	74,840	19,362	24,409	27,477	19,573
Castlereagh	692,596	2,206,628	560,543	182,775	204,754
Coleraine	275,977	328,022	257,492	211,032	239,712

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Cookstown	0	0	0	293,909	99,000
Craigavon	239,482	162,311	773,799	110,454	35,029
Derry	147,593	25,263	21,546	6,215	170,088
Down	29,702	10,002	12,491	129,764	482,612
Dungannon and South Tyrone	62,372	38,995	2,500	74,908	159,276
Fermanagh	1,715,333	264,044	1,552,711	267,059	317,300
Larne	452,264	76,136	171,947	75,931	108,930
Limavady	79,330	70,289	19,538	110,199	91,333
Lisburn	145,000	60,000	15,000	0	160,000
Magherafelt	13,800	72,859	11,773	25,000	42,209
Moyle	148,815	38,537	115,624	268,425	276,903
Newry and Mourne	621,000	576,000	237,000	796,000	785,000
Newtownabbey	33,642	176,394	404,274	1,303,648	2,449,810
North Down	82,347	213,163	268,666	47,563	66,439
Omagh	42,280	41,021	45,597	36,943	431,649
Strabane	273,140	783,993	636,457	154,729	279,778
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,945,311</b>	<b>6,367,816</b>	<b>11,094,608</b>	<b>6,267,811</b>	<b>11,695,902</b>

### Council Employees with Disabilities

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment how many employees have disabilities in each of the local councils and what percentage of the total workforce it reflects. (AQW 6089/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Department does not hold the requested information. 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.

### Planning Service

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of the Environment how many representations each Environment Minister has made to Planning Service, since 1998. (AQW 6190/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Details of the number of representations each Environment Minister has made to the Planning Service since 1998 are shown in the table below. This information has been derived largely from the Planning Service's electronic database. The information has not been validated against paper records as this would entail a manual exercise which could not be completed within the time available and could only be undertaken at disproportionate cost.

Minister	Period of Office	No of representations
Lord Dubs	1998- Dec 1999	0
Sam Foster	Dec 1999 - Feb 2000	0
George Howarth	Feb 2000 – May 2000	0
Sam Foster	May 2000 – Feb 2002	0

Minister	Period of Office	No of representations
Dermot Nesbitt	Feb 2002 – Oct 2002	0
Angela Smith	Oct 2002 - May 2005	0
Lord Rooker	May 2005 - May 2006	0
David Cairns	May 2006 – May 2007	0
Arlene Foster	May 2007 - June 2008	0
Sammy Wilson	June 2008 – Mar 2009	135

### Planning Service

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment to list, during each period of devolution since 1999, how many representations each Minister of the Environment has made to the Planning Service. (AQW 6193/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The number of representations made by successive Environment Ministers during each period of devolved government since 1999 is shown in the table below. This information has been derived largely from the Planning Service's electronic database. The information has not been validated against paper records as this would entail a manual exercise which could not be completed in the time available and could only be undertaken at disproportionate cost.

Minister	Period of Office	No of representations
Sam Foster	Dec 1999 - Feb 2000	0
Feb – May 2000 - devolved government suspended		
Sam Foster	May 2000 – Feb 2002	0
Dermot Nesbitt	Feb – Oct 2002	0
Oct 2002 – May 2007 – devolved government suspended		
Arlene Foster	May 2007 – June 2008	0
Sammy Wilson	June 2008 – Mar 2009	135

### Local Government Staff Commission

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the future of the Local Government Staff Commission. (AQW 6234/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My predecessor, Minister Foster, in her statement to the Assembly on 31 March 2008, stated that the Executive will review the functions that are to be delivered by local government 12 months after the new councils become operational and periodically thereafter.

I would envisage that the future of the Staff Commission will be considered as part of the first review in 2012.

### Vehicle Tax Bands

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5287/09, to detail the (i) makes; (ii) models; and (iii) age of the vehicles, owned by his Department for tax bands E and F. (AQW 6238/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The make, model and age of each of the vehicles referred to in AQW 5287/09 as falling within tax bands E and F are listed in the table below.

Tax Band	Make	Model	Age (years)
E	Volkswagen	Golf 1.6 Petrol	5

Tax Band	Make	Model	Age (years)
E	Ford	Galaxy Zetec TDCI 6G Heavy Oil	5
E	Ford	Galaxy Zetec TDDI Heavy Oil	3
E	Ford	Galaxy Zetec TDDI Heavy Oil	3
F	Mitsubishi	Shogun Sport	5
F	Mitsubishi	Shogun Sport	4
F	Mitsubishi	Shogun Sport	4
F	Mitsubishi	Shogun Sport	3
F	Mitsubishi	Shogun Sport	3
F	Mitsubishi	Shogun Sport	3
F	Mitsubishi	Shogun Sport	3
F	Mitsubishi	Shogun Sport	3
F	Ford	Ranger	2
F	Ford	110 Station Wagon	1

### IPPC Licence

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of the Environment if there are proposals to reduce the requirement criteria in applying for an IPPC licence in the poultry and pig agricultural sector, and if so, what are these proposals.

(AQW 6273/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** There are currently no proposals to revise the application requirements for IPPC farms as these are largely dictated by legislation. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency will not support any proposals which impose additional costs on the industry unless it can be clearly shown the benefit for outweigh the costs.

### MOT Tests

**Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the evidence for requiring an MOT test every year; and not less frequently as happens in other EU states.

(AQW 6285/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The MOT scheme is primarily a Road Safety measure designed to ensure that all cars more than 4 years old are examined at least once a year at an authorised MOT test station ensuring that they comply with certain requirements of the law and are properly maintained.

Evidence from international studies suggest that 4% to 5 % of road traffic collisions are directly attributable to vehicle defects and in 10% to 13% of collisions defects are a contributory factor.

Directive 96/96/EC specifies requirements for roadworthiness testing of motor vehicles including frequency of testing for passenger vehicles known locally as MOT. The minimum pattern requires a first test after 4 years and subsequent tests every 2 years, this is known as 4.2.2. Member States have freedom to test vehicles more frequently if they wish and as a result not all Member States test at the same frequency. NI tests are at 4 years and annually there after (4.1.1). At least 5 member states begin testing at 3 years or earlier and then annually (3.1.1). A further 4 states have a pattern of (3.2.1).

Evidence in a report published in 2008 by Department for Transport suggest that member states with a more frequent vehicle testing regime have lower rates of road deaths.

### Independent Working Group on PPS21

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of the Environment how the Independent Working Group on PPS21 will engage with the wider rural community, both in developing its report and in consulting on its final recommendations, including those (i) with a disability; (ii) lone parents; (iii) migrant workers; (iv) older people; (v) carers; and (vi) younger people. (AQW 6338/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Independent Working Group's methods of working, who it will meet and all other aspects of its work are matters for the Chair to decide in discussion with the members. This independent group was given clear terms of reference, agreed by the Executive and I cannot be involved in its day to day running.

### General Licensed Species List

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration has been given to introducing the Ruddy Duck on the general licensed species list, similar to the rest of the UK. (AQW 6368/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The conservation threat posed by this species is acknowledged and a number of actions are being taken to reduce their numbers. For example, Northern Ireland is part of a UK wide eradication programme, funded by the EU LIFE-Nature Programme.

The numbers in Northern Ireland are small so there are no immediate plans to allow the taking and killing of Ruddy Duck under cover of a general licence in Northern Ireland, as in Great Britain. However, it is planned to add it to Schedule 2 of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, allowing it to be treated as a quarry species during the shooting season.

### Allotments

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment how much land is set aside for allotments across all Council areas; and what plans there are to extend the area for allotments. (AQW 6476/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** This information is available in the Assembly Library having been provided in response to AQW/575/09 and AQW/1449/09.

Any plans that councils have to extend the area for allotments are not a matter for my Department. Questions relating to this should be directed to each individual council.

### Climate Change

**Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of the Environment if any of his climate change policy officials have indicated that they agree with his views on climate change. (AQO 2371/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** As outlined in the Northern Ireland Civil Service code of ethics my officials must provide objective and impartial advice. I am satisfied that that is what they do.

Reducing Northern Ireland's carbon footprint is the collective responsibility of all Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive. As Minister of the Environment I continue to meet my statutory obligations in terms of climate change policy. In recent weeks I sought and achieved Executive Committee agreement that a new carbon trading scheme, the Carbon Reduction Commitment, will apply in Northern Ireland through UK regulation. The enabling powers for this are provided for in the UK Climate Change Act 2008.

I believe my views have opened up the debate and raised public awareness on climate change. I have brought to public attention the cost and social implications that result directly from efforts to reduce Northern Ireland's carbon footprint. These include higher energy costs and higher levels of fuel poverty.

### Conflict of Interest

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department has taken legal advice in relation to a Ministerial conflict of interest with his role as a Belfast councillor, since he took up office. (AQO 2372/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department has taken no legal advice in relation to this issue since my appointment as Minister.

### Climate Change

**Mr Ford** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of how his views on climate change impact on his Department's commitments to reducing Northern Ireland's carbon footprint. (AQO 2374/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** As outlined in the Northern Ireland Civil Service code of ethics my officials must provide objective and impartial advice. I am satisfied that that is what they do.

Reducing Northern Ireland's carbon footprint is the collective responsibility of all Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive. As Minister of the Environment I continue to meet my statutory obligations in terms of climate change policy. In recent weeks I sought and achieved Executive Committee agreement that a new carbon trading scheme, the Carbon Reduction Commitment, will apply in Northern Ireland through UK regulation. The enabling powers for this are provided for in the UK Climate Change Act 2008.

I believe my views have opened up the debate and raised public awareness on climate change. I have brought to public attention the cost and social implications that result directly from efforts to reduce Northern Ireland's carbon footprint. These include higher energy costs and higher levels of fuel poverty.

### Planning System

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the risks associated with delivering a reformed planning system following transfer of powers to local government by May 2011. (AQO 2375/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Members will be aware that I hope to publish a consultation paper outlining wide-ranging proposals for reform of the planning system, including the changes necessary to transfer the majority of planning functions to the new local councils. Many of the proposed changes will require legislative change and our PSA commitment is to bring forward the relevant legislation by March 2011.

The major risk facing the reform programme at present is the extremely tight legislative timetable. I had hoped that the consultation paper would have been issued before now. However, the paper has not yet been included on Executive agenda, primarily because I have been unable to secure the deputy First Minister's agreement that he is content with the consultation paper. He has recently raised a number of issues, which we are currently trying to address. Such delays are having a significant knock-on effect on the overall programme and therefore our ability to meet the commitment to bring forward the legislation for a reformed planning system by 2011.

### Climate Change

**Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of the Environment how many local environmental NGOs have shown their support for his views on climate change. (AQO 2376/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Local environmental NGOs and I agree on a number of issues relating to climate change. We accept climate change is happening. However, we would disagree on the causes. We also have common ground on the need to adapt to climate change impacts regardless of what has caused them. In terms of adaptation measures, in November 2008 the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development and I published Northern Ireland Flood Maps. These maps will assist in sustainable planning policy and development. I am sure environmental NGOs support this practical approach of adapting to climate change.

## Carbon Footprint

**Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his carbon footprint, in the same way as he did for some members of the Environment Committee. (AQO 2377/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** I assume the member is referring to my attendance at the Environment Committee on 26 February. As I explained at the time and it is recorded in Hansard, I have not studied my carbon footprint because I am not exercised about it. I was simply giving the information to members who seem to be deeply exercised by the matter.

## Local Government

**Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the formation of local government transition committees, being created to facilitate the merging of the proposed new council formats. (AQO 2378/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** I am pleased to report that the eleven Transition Committees have now been established. The Transition Committees comprise elected members from the constituent councils which will form the new authorities. Their primary role is to take the key decisions necessary to ensure that there are eleven effective councils in place in May 2011.

It is my intention to underpin the Transition Committees in legislation. Provisions are being included in the Local Government (Contracts) Bill which is to come before this House in June of this year.

Each of the Transition Committees supported by a Transition Management Team comprising senior officers from the amalgamating Councils and the transferor public bodies.

## Local Government Boundaries Commissioner: Revised Recommendations Report

**Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the recommendations made in the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's Revised Recommendations report. (AQO 2379/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner has been tasked with providing recommendations for the boundaries and names of the eleven new districts, and the number, boundaries and names of the wards that make them up.

When the Commissioner published his Provisional Recommendations in September 2008, he asked for written representations to be submitted by 12 November. Public hearings, conducted by Assistant Commissioners, were arranged for each of the 11 proposed local government districts in the period from 20 to 28 November, providing an opportunity for oral representations.

The Commissioner's Revised Recommendations take into consideration the written and oral representations submitted in response to the Provisional Recommendations. If individuals, communities or their representatives wish to comment on the Revised Recommendations in relation to local identities or any other matter, they have an opportunity to make representations to the Commissioner in writing by 9 April 2009.

The Commissioner is independent of central government. It is not for me, or my Department, to make any assessment of the Revised Recommendations, or any aspect of those recommendations. I will read his final report with great interest but it would be inappropriate for me to comment at this stage.

## Local Government Boundaries Commissioner: Revised Recommendations Report

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the consideration given to the identities of local communities in the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's Revised Recommendations report. (AQO 2380/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner has been tasked with providing recommendations for the boundaries and names of the eleven new districts, and the number, boundaries and names of the wards that make them up.

When the Commissioner published his Provisional Recommendations in September 2008, he asked for written representations to be submitted by 12 November. Public hearings, conducted by Assistant Commissioners, were arranged for each of the 11 proposed local government districts in the period from 20 to 28 November, providing an opportunity for oral representations.

The Commissioner's Revised Recommendations take into consideration the written and oral representations submitted in response to the Provisional Recommendations. If individuals, communities or their representatives wish to comment on the Revised Recommendations in relation to local identities or any other matter, they have an opportunity to make representations to the Commissioner in writing by 9 April 2009.

The Commissioner is independent of central government. It is not for me, or my Department, to make any assessment of the Revised Recommendations, or any aspect of those recommendations. I will read his final report with great interest but it would be inappropriate for me to comment at this stage.

### **East Antrim MP: Correspondence**

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail on how many occasions his Department and agencies have received correspondence from the Member of Parliament for East Antrim, since 9 June 2008. (AQO 2381/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department and agencies have received correspondence from me as the Member of Parliament for East Antrim on 446 occasions since 9 June 2008.

I have also made 135 representations to Planning Service in the form of meetings, telephone calls and written correspondence since that time.

### **ROI Counterpart: Meetings**

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on any meetings he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 2382/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** I met John Gormley last Friday at the North South Ministerial Council environment meeting which took place in Farmleigh, in Dublin when we discussed the areas of co-operation mandated by the NSMC.

### **Badger Baiting**

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to tackle badger baiting. (AQO 2383/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Badgers already receive full protection under the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985. The Order also makes it an offence to damage or disturb their sett or to disturb the badger if it is in the sett.

In addition, I have secured the approval from the Secretary of State to take forward the introduction of custodial sentences for severe cases of wildlife crime which could include badger baiting. This is part of the review of the Wildlife Order, which is intended to ensure that effective enforcement measures are in place to provide adequate protection for our wildlife. I will bring these measures to the Assembly later in the year with the objective of having the legislation in place for mid 2010.

Responsibility for investigating and enforcing any alleged wildlife crime incident under the Wildlife Order falls to the PSNI. NIEA does not have an active role in this issue, but will provide expertise and assistance to the PSNI in such instances and works closely with their Wildlife Liaison Officer.

### **Local Government**

**Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the legislative processes and timeframes which will enable local government co-option and severance arrangements. (AQO 2384/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The provision to enable the Department to make a severance scheme for district councillors will be included in a forthcoming Local Government Bill which I plan to introduce to the Assembly in June 2009.

A separate consultation on the proposed severance scheme will start in April. One of the areas on which I will be seeking views is when such a scheme should be made available. The responses to this question will inform when the regulations setting out the detail of the scheme will be made. The responses will also inform my future discussions with the Secretary of State about the legislation governing co-option.

As matters relating to elections (which would include co-options to fill casual vacancies) are excepted matters under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, they fall outside the competence of the Assembly.

### Road Safety Council: Funding

**Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the consultant's reports used to justify the withdrawal of funding from the Road Safety Council. (AQO 2385/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Three successive reports by independent consultants, over the last eleven years, have indicated that the Road Safety Council 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.

The British Institute of Traffic Education Research (BITER) review of 1997 contained 31 recommendations and concluded that, while many local committees performed a valuable and cost effective function in relation to highlighting specific local road safety problems (mainly related to engineering) and raising awareness on both general and specific road safety issues through media publicity and local initiatives, much of the work of the Road Safety Council did not have an apparent cost effective road safety benefit. The report also recognised the value of some of the activities of the Council and its committees. However, it did not consider that their activities as a whole significantly enhanced the work of the Road Safety Education Branch and the Roads Service. It also stated that the Council's activities in 1996/97 were unlikely to represent value for money in light of the £154k grant to the Council.

The 2002 BITER report stated that partial implementation of the recommendations contained in the 1997 report had taken place. A few committees had demonstrated initiative and independence in establishing and supporting diverse road safety initiatives. However, certain committees had set themselves against any change, no matter how useful this might have been. The report stated that it was doubtful whether funding should be given to a committee some of whose activities appeared to be subversive and at odds with the policies of the DOE.

A further 20 recommendations were presented in 2002 and BITER concluded that, while a number of activities of the RSC and the local committees sought to enhance the road safety priorities of the DOE, funds spent on events such as the annual congress did not represent good value for money. The report also found that there was great variation between the committees. Some were proactive, had obtained sponsorship from a variety of sources and held meetings that were well attended; other committees were poorly attended, relied solely on grant money and appeared to achieve relatively little. BITER recommended that underperforming committees should have their funding withdrawn. It also stated that better communication channels were required between the RSC and the local committees (and the committees themselves) and that financial controls on the RSC and the committees must be tightened up.

The current review by PA Consulting Group is the most comprehensive and highly critical evaluation of the Council to date and the 37 key findings in the report cover a number of deficiencies ranging from a lack of strategic direction, leadership and control, through the absence of targeted local activities, to the inability of the Council to bring added value to the delivery of the Road Safety Strategy 2002-12.

It detailed the disproportionate central overhead cost, which did not represent reasonable value for money and reported that activities undertaken by the committees are neither evidence-based nor exhibit best practice; more specifically they did not target causation factors of collisions in local communities and there was little evidence of sharing of good practice in delivery of activities across committees. It also reported that the Council and the committees have failed to address key recommendations identified in the previous reviews.

## DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

## Savings in Rates

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what are the savings in rates for (i) domestic; and (ii) non-domestic ratepayers as a result of the 2009/10 rate freeze, broken down by each local government district. (AQW 5423/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds):** I announced on 15 December 2008 that regional non-domestic rates would be frozen in cash terms at current levels for 2009/2010 instead of increasing by an inflationary factor of 2.7% as originally intended. This produces a savings for non-domestic ratepayers of around £7.8 million. A detailed breakdown by local government area is provided in Table 1.

Regional domestic rates have been frozen for a three year period from 2008/09 to 2010/11 and it is more difficult to quantify the full extent of the saving to domestic ratepayers in 2009/10. However, on the assumption that the domestic rates might have been increased by the same inflationary figure of 2.7%, the savings to domestic ratepayers would be £7.4m. A detailed breakdown by local government area is provided in Table 2.

**TABLE 1: IMPACT ON NON DOMESTIC REGIONAL RATE REVENUE OF A REGIONAL RATE FREEZE COMPARED TO A 2.7% INCREASE**

District	Revenue With Freeze	Revenue with no freeze	Savings for Non-Domestic Rate Payer
Antrim	£9,906,708	£10,174,189	£267,481
Ards	£6,475,163	£6,649,992	£174,829
Armagh	£5,356,058	£5,500,671	£144,614
Ballymena	£9,724,194	£9,986,747	£262,553
Ballymoney	£2,000,968	£2,054,994	£54,026
Banbridge	£4,090,353	£4,200,793	£110,440
Belfast	£96,799,421	£99,413,005	£2,613,584
Carrickfergus	£4,270,528	£4,385,832	£115,304
Castlereagh	£10,038,270	£10,309,304	£271,033
Coleraine	£9,124,539	£9,370,901	£246,363
Cookstown	£3,997,250	£4,105,175	£107,926
Craigavon	£12,766,232	£13,110,920	£344,688
Down	£6,214,835	£6,382,636	£167,801
Dungannon & South Tyrone	£6,137,103	£6,302,805	£165,702
Fermanagh	£8,176,018	£8,396,770	£220,752
Larne	£4,766,010	£4,894,692	£128,682
Limavady	£3,152,486	£3,237,603	£85,117
Lisburn	£16,693,094	£17,143,807	£450,714
Derry	£18,942,661	£19,454,113	£511,452
Magherafelt	£3,722,264	£3,822,765	£100,501
Moyle	£1,173,080	£1,204,753	£31,673
Newry And Mourne	£12,013,435	£12,337,798	£324,363
Newtownabbey	£13,473,034	£13,836,806	£363,772
North Down	£11,195,874	£11,498,163	£302,289

District	Revenue With Freeze	Revenue with no freeze	Savings for Non-Domestic Rate Payer
Omagh	£6,883,475	£7,069,329	£185,854
Strabane	£3,381,427	£3,472,725	£91,299
<b>Total</b>	<b>£290,474,479</b>	<b>£298,317,290</b>	<b>£7,842,811</b>

TABLE 2: IMPACT ON DOMESTIC REGIONAL RATE REVENUE OF A REGIONAL RATE FREEZE COMPARED TO A 2.7% INCREASE

District	Revenue With Freeze	Revenue with no freeze	Savings for Domestic Rate Payer
Antrim	£7,264,475	£7,460,615	£196,141
Ards	£14,033,668	£14,412,577	£378,909
Armagh	£8,105,990	£8,324,852	£218,862
Ballymena	£9,268,792	£9,519,050	£250,257
Ballymoney	£4,067,646	£4,177,473	£109,826
Banbridge	£6,884,434	£7,070,314	£185,880
Belfast	£47,331,489	£48,609,439	£1,277,950
Carrickfergus	£5,603,116	£5,754,400	£151,284
Castlereagh	£12,510,561	£12,848,347	£337,785
Coleraine	£11,318,877	£11,624,486	£305,610
Cookstown	£5,141,098	£5,279,908	£138,810
Craigavon	£11,543,215	£11,854,882	£311,667
Down	£10,906,424	£11,200,897	£294,473
Dungannon & South Tyrone	£7,884,049	£8,096,919	£212,869
Fermanagh	£9,160,840	£9,408,182	£247,343
Larne	£4,399,976	£4,518,775	£118,799
Limavady	£4,194,871	£4,308,133	£113,262
Lisburn	£18,988,020	£19,500,697	£512,677
Derry	£13,360,618	£13,721,355	£360,737
Magherafelt	£5,806,779	£5,963,562	£156,783
Moyle	£3,030,215	£3,112,031	£81,816
Newry And Mourne	£14,023,843	£14,402,487	£378,644
Newtownabbey	£12,281,799	£12,613,408	£331,609
North Down	£16,622,943	£17,071,763	£448,819
Omagh	£6,506,798	£6,682,481	£175,684
Strabane	£4,551,097	£4,673,976	£122,880
<b>Total</b>	<b>£274,791,635</b>	<b>£282,211,009</b>	<b>£7,419,374</b>

Note: The amount of domestic revenue foregone does not include the impact of reliefs as that information is not available by district council area. This produces a slightly different total.

## Regional Rate

**Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the expected yield from the regional rate in (i) 2008/09; (ii) 2009/10; and (iii) 2010/11, and to set out the assumptions behind these figures. (AQW 5537/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The expected yield from the regional rate is forecast to be £533m in 2008/09, and £543m in 2009/10. A figure has not yet been finalised for the year 2010/2011.

### **Lone Pensioner Allowance Scheme**

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for the latest figures for the number of individuals taking up lone pensioners allowance in (i) the Ards Borough Council area and (ii) the Strangford constituency, and the total value of lone pensioners allowance paid to people in Ards and Strangford. (AQW 5805/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Land & Property Services has made 923 awards of Lone Pensioner Allowance with a total value of £145,029 for the Ards Borough Council area. Land & Property Services records this information by local government district and not parliamentary constituency. These figures do not include awards of the allowance made by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

### **Lone Pensioner Allowance Scheme**

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for the latest figures for (i) the number of people who have taken up; and (ii) the total paid out of, the lone pension allowance in (a) the North Down Borough Council area; and (b) the North Down constituency. (AQW 5891/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Land & Property Services has made 1,569 awards of Lone Pensioner Allowance with a total value of £268,974 for the North Down Borough Council area. Land & Property Services records this information by local government district and not parliamentary constituency. These figures do not include awards of the allowance made by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

### **Reducing Stress in the Workplace**

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given that stress is the primary reason for absence from work, to outline what actions his Department intends to bring forward to increase motivation and morale and reduce stress levels in the workplace. (AQW 6143/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Department of Finance and Personnel has adopted and will continue to adopt a range of actions 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.

The DFP Policy Statement – ‘Stress in the Workplace and Guidance on Stress in the Workplace’ was developed in order to promote the strategic aim ‘to proactively manage attendance and promote, maintain and improve the welfare, including the physical and mental well-being of staff’.

Measures are in place to assist staff who experience such difficulties including an information booklet, promotion of work life balance, healthy lifestyle programmes and Workplace Health Improvement Programme. In addition, staff can avail of the support of Occupational Health Service (OHS), Welfare Support Service and an employee assistance programme which is available 24/7 for staff and immediate family members.

The use of Stress Questionnaires enables early intervention and appropriate support which is essential in stress cases. Immediate referral to the Occupational Health Service is and will continue to be made when required. OHS is committed to bringing health promotion to the workplace and does so through its Lifestyle and Physical Assessment Programme. A Health and Wellbeing Improvement Study is due to commence in May 2009 and is being taken forward in collaboration with the OHS and NI Civil Service Sports (NICSSA). ‘Your Life – Your Health’ is a health awareness course designed specifically with young civil servants in mind. The OHS have teamed up with Health Works to address key health issues amongst the under 25 age category. As part of our commitment to the NICS Workplace Health Improvement Programme, (WHIP) we have fully supported this programme and encouraged staff attendance across the Department.

As part of the OHS health promotion series, we recently circulated a factsheet on mental health issues, to all staff. This will be followed up by 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 DFP staff with detailed guidance on tackling stress.

Consideration is being given to undertaking an NICS-wide stress survey. It is hoped that the results of the survey will help to inform and influence policy direction and target 'hotspots'.

All policy and guidance is intended to compliment existing policies such as Dignity at Work, Health & Safety and Managing Attendance.

### Civil Service

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he is aware of the difficulties being experienced by Northern Ireland Civil Servants due to the introduction of HR Connect; and for his assessment of when the new system will deliver an efficient and effective service. (AQW 6189/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The HRConnect service is a key element of a wider programme to transform how personnel services are delivered within the Northern Ireland Civil Service. There has been good progress on implementing HRConnect with four services now in live operation, a further two due to be implemented this month and the final service scheduled for this summer.

I am aware of some difficulties which have arisen in relation to the payroll service. Whilst the vast majority of the 27,400 staff are being paid correctly and on time, there been a number of staff who have received an inaccurate pay. This level of service is not acceptable and officials are working with the Contractor to ensure appropriate action is taken including making manual payments to staff who may have received an inaccurate pay.

Officials have also raised some concerns with the Contractor about the capacity and capability of the Shared Service Centre (SSC). Particular issues have centred on the capacity of the telephone system to handle large volume of calls at peak times and the ability of SSC staff to accurately process the volume of data changes submitted each month.

A range of actions have been agreed to address these problems and improving customer service is now a priority for both the NICS and the Contractor.

### Civil Service

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the average salary was in the Northern Ireland Civil Service for full-time employees, in the last financial year. (AQW 6289/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The full-time equivalent average salary, as at the 1st April 2008 for Northern Ireland Civil Servants was £21,819.

For those staff who do not work on a full-time basis, a calculation is used in order to arrive at an annual full-time equivalent which has been taken into account in the above calculation.

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) projects; and (ii) amounts of the capital investments planned for the North Down constituency, for each of the next two financial years. (AQW 6341/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Department of Finance and Personnel currently has no capital investment projects planned for the North Down constituency in the financial years 09/10 and 10/11.

### Alcohol Related Deaths

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many alcohol related deaths there have been in (i) 2006; (ii) 2007; (iii) 2008; and (iv) 2009 to date. (AQW 6379/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** In Northern Ireland in 2006, 2007 and 2008<sup>p</sup> respectively there were 248, 283 and 276 alcohol related deaths<sup>1</sup>. Mortality data for the first quarter of 2009 will be published in June.

<sup>1</sup> Alcohol related deaths are defined using International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes F10, G31.2, G62.1, I42.6, K29.2, K70, K73, K74, K86.0, X45, X65 and Y15.

<sup>P</sup> 2008 data is provisional

### Number of Births

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many children have been born in each Health and Social Care Trusts area, in each of the last five years. (AQW 6520/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The table below gives the number of births registered by mother's Health and Social Care Trust area of residence, for the years 2004 to 2008.

#### BIRTHS BY REGISTRATION YEAR AND HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST, 2004 TO 2008<sup>P</sup>

Area	Registration Year				
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Belfast HSCT	4,136	4,011	4,147	4,467	4,753
Northern HSCT	5,697	5,623	5,781	6,021	6,341
South Eastern HSCT	4,069	3,984	4,240	4,528	4,671
Southern HSCT	4,682	4,813	5,038	5,362	5,593
Western HSCT	3,734	3,897	4,066	4,073	4,273
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>22,318</b>	<b>22,328</b>	<b>23,272</b>	<b>24,451</b>	<b>25,631</b>

<sup>P</sup> 2008 data is provisional

### Budget Priorities

**Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explain why he does not consider revisiting the 2008/09 budget priorities given the current economic downturn. (AQO 2393/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The overall priorities for the Executive are set out in the Programme for Government document which was agreed by the Executive in January 2008.

The PfG indicates that growing a dynamic, innovative economy should be the Executive's top priority for the three year period up to 2011 whilst the downturn in economic conditions across the world has confirmed and that this decision was correct.

I am glad to see that the Committee for Finance and Personnel shares this view and I would fully agree with its concern that the Executive should not lose sight of the longer-term economic objectives for Northern Ireland, whilst it focuses on short-term activity to counteract the economic downturn.

The final opportunity for the Executive to make changes to the budget priorities for 2008-09 was as part of the February monitoring round.

On the 2nd of March I made a Statement to the Assembly regarding the outcome of this round.

Therefore it is now too late to revisit the budget priorities for this financial year.

### Water Charges

**Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the impact is on his spending plans following the decision to defer water charges for two years. (AQO 2394/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Executive, on 20 November 2008, took the decision to defer water charges for a further year. This decision was taken in-light of the significant pressures faced by households due to the impact of the global financial crisis.

Current Executive spending plans, for 2008-09, have not been adjusted as a result of this decision. For the incoming financial year it is intended that the additional costs falling to the Department for Regional

Development will be funded from resources that become available to the Executive during the 2009-10 in-year monitoring process.

### Electronic Tendering System

**Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given the announcement on 5 March 2009 in relation to the new electronic tendering system, how many small and medium sized enterprises have joined the tendering process for the first time. (AQO 2396/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** A new eSourcingNI web portal has been in operation since May 2008 within the Central Procurement Directorate of my Department. At present there is approximately 4,400 vendors registered on the system of which over 60% are declared SME's. Of these vendors who have registered on this portal over 50% have accessed tender documents since the go-live date. Unfortunately Central Procurement Directorate do not hold any records of how many SMEs have joined the tendering process for the first time.

### Education Redundancies

**Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with the Minister of Education about potential redundancies resulting from her Department's budgetary position. (AQO 2397/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Education Minister has not had any discussions with me about potential redundancies as a result of her Department's budgetary allocation.

### PEDU

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the work of the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit. (AQO 2398/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Following the completion of the delivery review of Planning Service in November 2008, it was agreed that a meeting in April should be arranged to allow the DOE Minister and myself to be briefed on both the progress and the impact of the Action Plan's implementation. During February, as part of a planned follow up, PEDU met with Planning Service to gauge the rate of progress made in implementing the recommendations arising from the review. This will enable PEDU to report its assessment back to me for the further joint meeting with Sammy Wilson in April.

As you are no doubt aware from recent press coverage, I have asked PEDU to undertake a short and focused joint review of Land and Property Services. The review team will report back to me in May with its recommendations and LPS will produce an action plan to address issues raised at the same time.

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 as 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.

### Rural Transport Services

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much money was allocated to the Department for Regional Development for rural transport services in the current financial year. (AQO 2399/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** In the February Monitoring round DRD were allocated total resource DEL of £535.72 million and total capital DEL of £548.42 million. It remains a matter for the DRD Minister how these funds are allocated and utilised by individual business areas in his Department.

## Construction Sector Employment

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel which capital building and infrastructural programmes he has fast tracked to help support employment in the construction sector; and to outline the money to support this action and the source of this money. (AQO 2400/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The construction industry makes an important contribution to the economy of Northern Ireland. Total output from the sector during the 12 months to September 2008 was in excess of £3.3bn.

Of particular concern is the downturn in the housing sector and its impact in recent months on many individuals. However, while real difficulties are being experienced by the private housing market, investment by the public sector, which continues to increase, is significantly benefiting the industry and will continue to do so over the remaining years of the Investment Strategy.

During this financial year alone, it is expected that Government capital investment will be in the order of £1.5bn. This compares with £676m five years ago. This is a dramatic increase in expenditure which has only been achievable by the devolved administration recognising the importance of capital investment in infrastructure and working with the construction industry to deliver.

Public sector investment is set to continue to increase over the remaining years of the Investment Strategy. The gross capital investment planned for the next two financial years is intended to be more than £3bn.

As I announced in December, my Department has been working with a wide range of Government construction clients, including the Department of Education, to move the procurement of projects forward as quickly as possible.

Whilst large construction projects have lengthy lead-in times involving careful planning, procurement and management, it is vitally important that Government ensures that projects which are scheduled to move to the market place do so as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

A key task for the Construction Industry Forum – Procurement Task Group is to monitor and report the flow of projects to the market place.

Central Procurement Directorate has, on behalf of Departments, provided the construction industry representatives at the Procurement Task Group with a comprehensive list of the projects to be advertised during the next three months or are already at various stages of the procurement process. This list includes some 60 projects with an aggregated value in excess of £400m.

Projects where procurement is due to commence this financial year or has just commenced include:

Roads Service – new A5 Western Transport Corridor - £600m;

Preparatory enabling work for new local hospital Omagh - £4m; and

Refurbishment of Newcastle Jobs & Benefits office - £2.1m.

Projects at various stages of the procurement process include:

Crumlin Road Gaol – Refurbishment of Gatehouse - £3m;

Two major roads projects including the A2 Broadbridge dualling in Londonderry at £20m and the A26/M2 Ballee East Road, Ballymena at £6m; and

Magherafelt High School - £11m.

In addition, I have recently instructed CPD to ensure that Departments continue to up date the information included in the current project list and to add new projects coming to the market place during the period April to June 2009.

Departments have advised that work scheduled to come to the market place during the period April to June 2009 includes:

Cairnshill Park and Ride, Newtownbreda - £3m;

37 separate Roads Service Term Contracts for Environmental Management and Maintenance worth approximately £19m per annum.

The funding for this significant capital investment programme is that allocated in the Budget 2008-11, with additional funding available from the Executive to allocate in 2008-09 arising from the £11.2 million from

the 2008 UK Budget and Pre-budget reports, as well as the access to our capital EYF stock and the use of current expenditure

### Civil Service Back Pay

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on outstanding back pay owed to civil servants. (AQO 2401/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** My officials are currently in discussions with the trade union with the aim of establishing a framework that could form the basis of a negotiated resolution of the current equal pay issue in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The issues under discussion are complex and may take some time to resolve. It is my hope that the matter can be brought to a conclusion on a basis that is both fair to staff but which, at the same time, recognises the need to minimise the impact across the public sector in Northern Ireland which will have to provide the funds to cover any payments that may be necessary.

### Budget Priorities

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explain why he does not consider revisiting the budget priorities in light of the economic downturn. (AQO 2402/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The expenditure plans for Northern Ireland departments over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 are based on the priorities set out in the Programme for Government which was agreed by the Executive in January 2008.

Whilst the Programme for Government will be reviewed on a periodic basis, the downturn in economic conditions further strengthens the case that the economy should remain the Executives highest priority.

### HR Connect

**Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the performance of HR Connect. (AQO 2403/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The HRConnect service is a key element of a wider programme to transform how personnel services are delivered within the Northern Ireland Civil Service. There has been very good progress with the implementation of this programme including four services now in live operation, a further two due to be implemented this month and the final service scheduled for this summer.

I am aware of difficulties which have arisen since launch of the payroll service in November 2008. Whilst the vast majority of the 27,400 staff receiving this service are being paid correctly and on time, there have been a number of staff who have received an inaccurate pay. My officials are working with the Contractor to ensure appropriate action is taken to address any issues which have arisen for their staff.

Officials have also raised some concerns about aspects of the services being delivered from the Shared Service Centre at a senior level with the Contractor. Particular issues have centred on the capacity of the telephone system to handle large volume of calls at peak times and the ability of SSC staff to accurately process the volume of data changes submitted each month. A range of actions have been agreed to address these problems and improving customer service is now a priority for both the NICS and the Contractor. The improvement plan for the SSC is designed to address concerns about customer service.

### NIHE Capital Maintenance Programme

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he will take to ensure adequate funding is provided for the Housing Executive Capital Maintenance Programme. (AQO 2404/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** To help alleviate the Pressures on the Department for Social Development's budget, resulting from a very significant shortfall in anticipated receipts, I have provided £20 million in additional funding to the Social Development Minister over recent monitoring rounds and have supported in the February monitoring round a reallocation within DSD of £10.5 million to housing.

Whilst I remain prepared to seek ways in which the housing programme can be prioritised within the overall package of funding available for redistribution at future monitoring rounds I do not have any pot of additional funding from which I can draw. It therefore clearly remains a matter for the Social Development Minister in the first instance to determine her priorities within the financial allocations she has already received.

### Lone Pensioner Allowance Scheme

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made in making payments under the Lone Pensioner Allowance Scheme. (AQO 2405/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Land & Property Services has received 18,328 applications for the Lone Pensioner Allowance of which 17,273 awards have been made, with a total value of £2,689,019. Some 970 applications were unsuccessful. Currently, 10 applications are being processed, while a further 75 await further information from claimants.

## DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

### Central Services Agency

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 529/09, what action his Department is taking to ensure that the Central Services Agency offers a service that complies with the Good Friday Agreement and the European Charter for Minority languages, and issues medical cards with the correct spelling of children's names in Irish, as they appear on the child's birth certificate, including fadas. (AQW 1981/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey):** As the computer systems presently used to register patients in Northern Ireland are not capable of inserting accents for non-English words, and to replace them immediately would incur significant cost, the Central Services Agency have agreed to amend manually any medical card on request until such time as a UK wide replacement automated system is introduced, which is planned to take place within the next 5 years.

### Minor Injuries Units

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the location of all the minor injuries units in operation, and the services that each unit provides. (AQW 5979/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In answering this question we have used the following definition of a Minor Injuries Unit: "A Type 3 Emergency Care Department is defined with designated accommodation for the reception of patients with a minor injury and/or illness. It may be doctor-led or nurse-led. A defining characteristic of this service is that it treats at least minor injuries and/or illnesses and can be routinely accessed without appointment".

There are four Minor Injuries Units in operation in Northern Ireland, as detailed below:

Facility	Location
South Tyrone Hospital MIU 9.00 am to 9.00 pm	Carland Road, Dungannon
Armagh Community Hospital MIU 9.00 am to 5.00 pm Mullinure Hospital MIU 5.00 pm to 9.00 am	Tower Hill, Armagh & Loughgall Road, Armagh
Ards MIU 9.00 am to 5.00 pm	Church Street, Newtonards

Facility	Location
Bangor MIU 9.00 am to 5.00 pm	Castle Street, Bangor BT20 4TA

### Nurses

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the paper work that nurses must complete as part of their job. (AQW 6073/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The paperwork completed by nurses is dependent on the job for which they are employed. There would be a disproportionate cost involved in undertaking a survey of all nursing roles and the paperwork associated with that role. All nurses caring for patients or clients must undertake some form of record keeping relating to the assessment, care, treatment, observations and progress of the patient journey. These notes are an important part of ensuring the provision of safe, effective, high quality care. The Nursing and Midwifery regulator, Nursing and Midwifery Council have set standards for records and record keeping which must be adhered to by all nurses. A copy of these standards is available at [www.nmc-uk.org](http://www.nmc-uk.org).

### Medical Records

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether entries in medical records can be amended; and if so, the circumstances in which such amendments can be made. (AQW 6078/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The entries in medical records can be amended in circumstances where it is identified that information is incorrect.

### Care in the Community

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much funding has been allocated for care in the community in the Foyle constituency by the Western Health and Social Care Trust, in the past five years. (AQW 6087/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information is not held by the Department in form requested.

### Care in the Community

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much additional money will be available for care in the community as a result of the closures of elderly care homes in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 6088/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** It is difficult to make a reliable estimate of such a figure at this stage given that such proposals are subject to the outcome of consultation.

I plan to invest some £60m from 2008/09 to 2010/11 (£35m recurrent investment) in community care services for the elderly in Northern Ireland, so that by March 2011 we will be able to support an additional 1,500 people in the community.

### Outpatient Appointment Waiting List Targets

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which Health and Social Care Trusts have failed to meet their outpatient appointment waiting list targets, in the last financial year. (AQW 6092/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information on the number of patients waiting for a first outpatient appointment are published by Hospital Information Branch on a quarterly basis in the Northern Ireland Waiting Lists Bulletin. The Waiting Lists Bulletin relating to the position at the end of December 2008 was published on Thursday 5th March (see link below): [http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/waitng\\_list\\_december\\_08\\_final.pdf](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/waitng_list_december_08_final.pdf)

### **Urgent Patient Care**

**Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the response time is for an ambulance ordered for urgent patient care. (AQW 6102/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Urgent patient care calls are calls requested by medical clinicians e.g. Doctor/GPs. The specified timeframe for the collection of the patient is determined by the clinician.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) aims to respond to 95% of calls for patients requiring urgent care within 15 minutes of the time specified by the doctor requesting transport.

### **Distribution of Department Publications**

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6108/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There is a requirement to provide hard copies of documents such as Annual Reports, Departmental Publications and Consultation Documents to certain recipients including political representatives, parliamentary contacts and Legal Deposit and other libraries.

MLAs are also advised of the launch of departmental public consultations via a letter of notification giving them the opportunity to obtain copies of the documents in their preferred format.

### **Ten-Day Payment Policy**

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures his Department has in place to ensure invoices are paid within ten-days. (AQW 6126/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A circular was issued across the Department on 11 December 2008, for action by cost centre managers and for information to all staff. This advised cost centre managers of the contents of DAO (DFP) 12/08 and the new commitment to paying businesses within 10 days. Cost centre managers were advised to take all possible steps to ensure suppliers were paid in respect of valid invoices or from the receipt of goods/services (whichever is the later) as promptly as possible.

### **Nursing Care on Rathlin Island**

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he will increase nursing care on Rathlin Island to 24 hours a day, seven days a week. (AQW 6130/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** During my visit to Rathlin Island in August 2008, I gave a commitment to the provision of 24/7 nursing care on the island. My Department has liaised with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in identifying options for such care. The Northern Trust is currently working with the Northern Health and Social Services Board, as the commissioner of healthcare services for the island, to try to finalise arrangements to meet this commitment. I am hopeful that new arrangements that will provide nursing care 24 hours a day, seven days a week will be in place as early as possible in the new financial year.

### Wet Age-Related Macular Degeneration

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the process by which Wet Age-Related Macular Degeneration is diagnosed. (AQW 6131/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Typically, patients are likely to notice visual disturbance in their eye over a period of weeks. The patient may then attend an optometrist or GP who would refer the patient to an ophthalmologist. The ophthalmologist will assess the patient's vision and if they suspect wet age-related macular degeneration will arrange a fluorescein angiogram and a retinal scan. A diagnosis would be made following review of these tests.

### Wet Age-Related Macular Degeneration

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what treatment is available for Wet Age-Related Macular Degeneration. (AQW 6132/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The treatments available for patients with wet age-related macular degeneration are argon laser, photodynamic therapy and the anti-VEGF drug ranibizumab (Lucentis).

### Wet Age-Related Macular Degeneration

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how cases of Wet Age-Related Macular Degeneration are prioritised for treatment. (AQW 6133/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** It is assumed this question relates to prioritisation in respect of treatment of wet age-related macular degeneration with the drug Lucentis.

The HSC is in the process of expanding existing macular services to provide treatment with Lucentis in line with the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance endorsed by my Department on 21 October 2008. In the meantime, Health and Social Services Boards will fund treatment for patients with the greatest clinical priority. In the main these are patients who have already lost sight in one eye, although other clinically exceptional circumstances may be considered.

### Domestic Violence

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to provide an update on the work of the Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence in relation to domestic violence; and (ii) to set out what measures are being taken to prevent and address domestic violence. (AQW 6135/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The next meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence is planned to take place in Castle Buildings on Wednesday 6 May 2009.

Although the full agenda has not yet been agreed it is likely to include:

- A short film presentation from Mrs Marie Brown from Foyle Women's Aid on the effects of domestic violence on children (a film produced in Londonderry);
- An analysis and evaluation of the current domestic violence media campaign, targeted at perpetrators;
- An examination of progress against targets in the current 2008/09 domestic violence action plan;
- An up date on progress on the 2008/09 Sexual Violence Action Plan;
- Endorsement of proposed 2009/10 Domestic Violence Action Plan.

I am confident the Domestic Violence Strategy and current Action Plan will comprehensively address your question about the measures being taken to prevent and address domestic violence. Both documents are available on my Department's website at [http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hss/domestic\\_violence/dv-publications.htm](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hss/domestic_violence/dv-publications.htm).

### Diabetes

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to establish regional centres of excellence for diabetes. (AQW 6136/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In Northern Ireland a wide range of services is provided for people with diabetes by healthcare professionals working in the hospital, primary and community care sectors. I have no current plans to establish regional centres of excellence for diabetes.

### People with Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give the per-capita spend, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, on people with speech, language and communication difficulties. (AQW 6137/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not available.

### Diabetes

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give the per-capita spend, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust on patients with diabetes. (AQW 6139/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not available.

### Diabetes

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people, broken down by constituency, are diagnosed with (i) type 1 diabetes; and (ii) type 2 diabetes. (AQW 6141/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information is not available in the form requested.

### Letters to Local Newspapers

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQO 2201/09 to detail the (i) weekly newspapers; (ii) date of publication; and (iii) the subject of each of the four letters which he submitted to local weekly newspapers in 2009, in his capacity as Minister. (AQW 6146/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The details of the four letters submitted are shown in the table.

TABLE – LETTERS TO EDITORIAL PAGES OF LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

Paper	Date of publication	Subject
Impartial Reporter	22 January 2009	Response to article on doubts over new South West hospital and ambulance service in the area.
Portadown Times	23 January 2009	Response to criticism of maternity unit at Craigavon Area Hospital
Tyrone Times	3 February 2009	Clarification over Primacare Healthcare Village
Ballymoney & Moyle Times	4 February 2009	Response to proposed closure of Rathmoyle Residential Care Home

### Alcohol Related Diseases

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the calculated benefits to the Health Service of a reduction in alcohol related diseases. (AQW 6150/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A 1998 report undertaken by my Department concluded that alcohol misuse was costing Northern Ireland Society approximately £770 million per year, and of this the direct costs to the Health Service were in the region of £25 million per year. Clearly any reduction in alcohol related diseases, and alcohol misuse generally, would have an impact in reducing these costs.

As the original costings are now likely to be an underestimate my Department is seeking to undertake a research project in the next financial year to give a truer quantifiable cost of alcohol misuse on both the Health Service and society in Northern Ireland.

### Tobacco-Related Diseases

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the calculated benefits to the Health Service of a reduction in tobacco-related diseases. (AQW 6151/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The table below sets out the different diseases of which smoking is recognised as being a contributable factor. Any reduction in smoking-related illnesses would benefit the Health Service in terms of reduced overall costs for treating these diseases. The latest available figures, which are for the 2003-04 year, show that the estimated Northern Ireland applicable total hospital costs of treating cancer, circulatory and respiratory diseases, of which smoking has been a contributory factor, was £74m.

#### LIST OF DISEASES ATTRIBUTABLE TO SMOKING

Smoking-related illnesses	
Lung Cancer	Other Cancer (unspecified site )
Upper respiratory cancer	Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease
Cancer of the oesophagus	Pneumonia
Bladder cancer	Ischaemic Heart Disease
Kidney cancer	Cerebrovascular Disease
Stomach cancer	Aortic Aneurysm
Cancer of the pancreas	Other Circulatory Diseases
Myeloid leukaemia	Stomach/Duodenal Ulcer

### Food Safety Promotion Board

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Food Safety Promotion Board was given an advertising budget of £581,780 without a tender being advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union. (AQW 6163/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The funding does not require to be advertised in the Official Journal. The Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB) is a North/South implementation body established by statute in 1999. It is jointly funded by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Health and Children (Ireland). The promotion of public health information in relation to food safety is a core function of this public body and the FSPB budget for promotional campaigns is agreed annually by the two sponsor departments and the finance departments in the two jurisdictions.

The Food Safety Promotion Board is required to comply with all regulatory and policy requirements on procurement when it engages external contractors to provide any service including advertising and promotional activities.

### Bangor Hospital Services

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what impact the announcement of a new £18m health village for Bangor will have on the future of Bangor Hospital services. (AQW 6215/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The development planned by Primacure is an independent healthcare project and has no connections whatsoever with the plans I have announced for investment in the health and social care infrastructure across Northern Ireland. My Department has had no discussions with Primacure and as such there is no plan to enter into any project or contract with Primacure.

The Eastern Health and Social Services Board and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust who are responsible for the commissioning and delivery of services in the Bangor area have indicated that this proposal has not been discussed with either of them.

### Hope Centre in Ballymena

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he has taken in the last six months to ensure that key posts in the Hope Centre in Ballymena are funded beyond 31 March 2009.

(AQW 6219/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The allocation of local funding, as well as the identification of local needs and local priorities, is the responsibility of the Health and Social Services Boards. Therefore it is not the role of my Department to become involved in the direct allocation of funding to individual initiatives or local organisations. However, my Department does have a role in overseeing the provision of an appropriate range of services across Northern Ireland to support those individuals and families affected by substance misuse.

To this end, I have ensured that there will be no reduction in the funding available for addressing alcohol and drug misuse in the Northern Board area or across Northern Ireland. In fact, funding available for addressing this issue at the local level will increase to almost £5.2 million in 2009/10, and the Northern Board will receive £1.25 million of that budget.

The Northern Board has informed my Department that they have offered Hope Centre funding to extend their Family Support Programme for another year, and I understand this offer has now been accepted.

### Hope Centre in Ballymena

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will meet with North Antrim MLAs to discuss the possible closure of the Hope Centre before the end of this month.

(AQW 6220/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The identification of local need and local priorities in relation to addressing alcohol and drug misuse, and the provision of services in order to meet these needs, is the responsibility of the local Health and Social Service Boards. It would therefore not be appropriate for me to meet with you to discuss these issues further at this time.

However, the Northern Health and Social Service Board has offered the Hope Centre a one year extension of funding for its family support service, and I understand the Hope Centre has now accepted this contract.

### Hope Centre in Ballymena

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the drug rehabilitation services, which are similar to one provided by the Hope Centre, which are available to the public. (AQW 6221/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Hope Centre provides counselling, advice, support, complimentary therapies, and family support services for substance misusers and their families. Such services are also provided by a range of community, voluntary, and statutory organisations, primarily at the local level. Organisations may operate different delivery models and on varying scales. As the funding of local services to meet local needs and priorities is the responsibility of the local Health and Social Services Boards, the Department does not hold details on all the organisations that provide such services.

Information on the range of alcohol and drug misuse services that are currently funded by Northern Health and Social Service Board can be found in the local directory of services at: <http://www.nhssb.n-i.nhs.uk/partnerships/ndact.php>

### Dental Care

**Mr Weir asked** the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many pregnant women are registered with Health Service dentists. (AQW 6225/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not available.

### Dental Care

**Mr Weir asked** the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are in place to ensure that pregnant women get free access to Health Service dental care. (AQW 6226/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Pregnant women and those who have had a baby in the previous 12 months are entitled to free Health Service dental treatment. Unfortunately there is no obligation on General Dental Practitioners to accept anyone for Health service treatment, nor do the current contractual arrangements permit HSS Boards to compel practitioners to provide general dental services.

Officials in my Department have worked closely with the HSS Boards to recruit 38 additional dentists to provide Health Service dental services in areas where access is restricted. All 38 dentists should be in post by autumn of this year including 4 destined for North Down. To provide longer term stability, my Department is currently negotiating a new contract with the dental profession. This will allow services to be commissioned in areas where access is currently problematic, modernise dental services and ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland has access to high quality effective dental care.

### Measles

**Mrs I Robinson asked** the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the number of cases of measles that have been detected in each of the last five years. (AQW 6227/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The table below provides the number of clinical notifications under the Public Health Act for each year, and also the numbers of laboratory confirmed cases (RVL and salivary antibody testing) for each year.

Year of report	Notifications	Laboratory confirmed cases
2004	90	1
2005	56	0
2006	52	0
2007	31	0
2008	24	4

### Dental Care

**Mr Weir asked** the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many dental practices in North Down accept Health Service patients. (AQW 6228/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Information is not available in respect of which practices are currently accepting new Health Service patients. However, Central Services Agency figures show that 22 practices in North Down registered new Health Service patients, at any time, during the past year, although 2 of these had a very low number of new registrations.

### Drug Abuse

**Mr McKay asked** the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what strategies his Department has to tackle drug abuse. (AQW 6240/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The cross-Departmental New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD) 2006-2011 sets out my Department's strategy for addressing the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse in Northern Ireland. The NSD is available at: <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/nsdad-finalversion-may06.pdf>

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) projects; and (ii) amount of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6263/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I can confirm that a new Bayview Resource Centre has been recently opened in Bangor at a cost of £4.6 million. The balance of the contractual commitments for this scheme will be paid in 2009/10.

There are no planned developments in the North Down constituency area in 2010/11.

### New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs 2006 – 2011 has Key Performance Indicators which are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timed) and if not for his assessment of whether the target figures should be included rather than being aspirational goals. (AQW 6275/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD) sets out a range of key alcohol and drug related performance indicators. These are available in the NSD at the following link: <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/nsdad-finalversion-may06.pdf>. Reductions in any of these indicators over the life of the NSD will show progress against its overall aim of reducing the level of alcohol and drug misuse related harm in Northern Ireland.

In addition, under Public Service Agreement 8 (promoting health and addressing health inequities) within the Programme for Government a number of specific "SMART" targets have been developed to measure progress against the implementation of the Strategy. These include:

- by 2010, ensure a 5% reduction in the proportion of adults who binge drink;
- by 2010, ensure a 10% reduction in the proportion of young people who report getting drunk;
- by 2010, ensure a 5% reduction in the proportion of young adults taking illegal drugs during the previous month; and
- by 2011, ensure a 10% reduction in the number of children at risk from parental alcohol and/or drug dependency

### Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

**Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service posts are filled on a retained basis; and (ii) what percentage this is of the total number of posts. (AQW 6296/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am advised that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service currently has 980 posts filled on a retained basis. This equates to approximately 52% of the current establishment of 1881 firefighters.

### Domestic Violence

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the work of the Regional Strategy Group (Domestic Violence). (AQW 6339/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Regional Strategy Group on Domestic Violence is responsible for co-ordinating actions across both the statutory and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland to deliver on the aims and objectives of the Government's domestic violence strategy Tackling Violence at Home and the accompanying annual action plans. I am confident that the Domestic Violence Strategy and the current Action Plan will comprehensively address your question about the work of the Group. Both documents are available on my Department's website at [http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hss/domestic\\_violence/dv-publications.htm](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hss/domestic_violence/dv-publications.htm)

### Domestic Violence

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the work of the Inter Ministerial Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence. (AQW 6340/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The next meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence is planned to take place on Wednesday 6 May 2009.

Although the full agenda has not yet been agreed it is likely to include:

- A short film presentation from Mrs Marie Brown from Foyle Women's Aid on the effects of domestic violence on children (a film produced in Londonderry);
- An analysis and evaluation of the current domestic violence media campaign, targeted at perpetrators;
- An examination of progress against targets in the current 2008/09 domestic violence action plan;
- An up date on progress on the 2008/09 Sexual Violence Action Plan;
- Endorsement of proposed 2009/10 Domestic Violence Action Plan.

### Binge Drinking

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department is considering putting in place a minimum price per alcohol unit to curb binge drinking similar to that proposed in Scotland. (AQW 6343/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Addressing alcohol misuse, particularly binge and young people's drinking, is a key priority for my Department. To this end, my Department has led in the development of a Young People's Drinking Action Plan that seeks to co-ordinate action to tackle this issue. This plan is currently with my Executive colleagues for consideration.

The Young People's Drinking Action Plan highlights the issue of minimum unit pricing, and this is an area which will need further consideration across the Executive as responsibility for this issue does not lie with my Department. There may also be issues in relation to EU Legislation and Competition Laws, and I will therefore be watching the developments in Scotland with great interest.

### Binge Drinking

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department's response is to the Donaldson Report on Alcohol Consumption and Binge Drinking. (AQW 6344/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department noted the contents of Sir Liam Donaldson's report "150 years of the Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer: On the state of public health 2008" in relation to alcohol misuse with interest.

Like Sir Liam Donaldson, I have been concerned about the level of alcohol misuse for some time, therefore addressing this issue, particularly binge and young people's drinking, is a key priority for my Department and the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs. I agree that we need to raise awareness of the harm alcohol is doing, not just to the heaviest drinkers, but to our whole society.

I particularly noted Sir Liam's proposal to introduce a minimum unit price for alcohol. My Department has led on the development of a cross-Department Young People's Drinking Action Plan. This document highlights the issue of minimum unit pricing. However, this is an area which will need further consideration across the Executive as responsibility does not lie with my Department. There may also be issues in relation to EU

Legislation and Competition Laws, and I will therefore be watching closely the developments in England and Scotland on this issue.

### Binge Drinking

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking, and intends to take, to combat binge drinking. (AQW 6345/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department takes the misuse of alcohol very seriously, particularly binge drinking and underage drinking. Through the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs, current actions to address this issue include:

- the establishment of a binge drinking advisory group;
- the continuation of the award winning binge drinking public information campaign;
- local treatment, support and information programmes that support the regional campaign; and
- positive engagement with the drinks industry.

Latest figures from the Adult Drinking Patterns Survey show that binge drinking levels have fallen from 43% of men and 33% of women in 2005 to 33% and 29% respectively in 2008. I am due to issue an integrated action plan to address young people's drinking in the near future.

### Lough Cuan Residential Home

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm (i) that proposals in relation to the closure of Loch Cuan have been presented to him; and (ii) that a full investigation will be carried out by his officials, taking into account individual risk assessments for each resident, before making a decision on these proposals. (AQW 6402/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As you are aware the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust have recently completed the 12 week public consultation surrounding the proposals for modernizing statutory residential care provision. The Trust has made recommendations concerning the proposals on all three of the statutory homes, including Loch Cuan. Before reaching a final decision I will consider all the evidence available and the health, well being and future social care requirements, of all the older people in the South Eastern Trust area, and in particular that of the current residents of all three statutory residential homes, will be of utmost importance in that decision making process.

### Health Screening

**Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the health screening arrangements in place for young people participating in sport. (AQW 6423/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** At present there are no health screening arrangements in place for young people participating in sport. In relation to sudden cardiac death the UK National Screening Committee has advised against a screening programme.

Sudden cardiac death is not caused by a single condition; there are more than twenty conditions that cause sudden cardiac death and many of these are difficult to detect through screening. Unfortunately there is no screening test that can detect all these conditions, and for many of these conditions there is no known or proven treatment. Until there is a test that can accurately assess who is likely to be affected, and we can advise them how to prevent death, screening the whole population is not realistic.

### New Respite Care Centre for Young People

**Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the new Respite Care Centre for young people in the Omagh/Fermanagh area. (AQW 6425/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Due to difficulties in obtaining a suitable site, the then Sperin and Lakeland Trust was unable to proceed with the scheme proposed in the business case which was approved in December 2005.

Since then, considerable work has been undertaken to address these difficulties and the current proposal is that the replacement will be in the grounds of the former Omagh General Hospital.

It is anticipated that a revised business case will be submitted to my Department by the Trust within the next few weeks. A decision on the timetable cannot be made until that business case has been addressed and approved.

### **Tyrone County Hospital**

**Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to outline what emergency ambulance provision is in place in Omagh following the removal of acute services from the Tyrone County Hospital; (ii) to detail how many ambulance vehicles are based in Omagh during the (a) day shift; and (b) night shift; and (iii) if accident and emergency vehicles are deployed to other stations whilst those vehicles are out on calls. (AQW 6455/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There are four accident and emergency (A&E) ambulances and one paramedic rapid response vehicle (RRV) based at the Omagh ambulance station.

Three A&E ambulances operate 24/7 on a 12 hour shift pattern while the fourth operates Sunday to Thursday from 0800 hours to 2300 hours and on a 24 hour basis on Friday and Saturday in two 12 hour shifts. The RRV operates 0800 hours to 2400 hours seven days a week.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service sends the nearest available appropriate resource to 999 calls. Its Regional Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre dynamically deploys resources as necessary depending on the level of demand.

### **Family Support Workers**

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the role of the Family Support Worker across all Health and Social Care Trusts; and for his assessment of whether they are an important factor in the community. (AQW 6456/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Family support services are delivered by a range of staff across Boards and Trusts. Such services are delivered by a combination of Trust staff and services commissioned from the voluntary and community sector. The detail of the role of the Family Support Worker is contingent on the service provided and the setting in which it is provided. The means by which family support services are organised and provided is a matter for HSC Trusts and Boards.

All family support services are important and my commitment to the development and delivery of such services remains significant.

### **Family Support Workers**

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many of the 73 children in the Armagh and Dungannon areas who are receiving assistance from a Family Support Worker, are on the At Risk register, broken down by each area. (AQW 6457/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not collected centrally, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

### **Family Support Workers**

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area, how many Family Support Workers (i) are; and (ii) are not on a contract, broken down by areas in the Trust. (AQW 6458/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is given in the table below.

**TABLE 1: NUMBER OF FAMILY SUPPORT WORKERS (I) ON CONTRACTS; AND (II) NOT ON CONTRACTS IN THE SOUTHERN HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST BROKEN DOWN BY AREA AS AT MARCH 2009.**

Trust Area	Number of Family Support Workers on a contract		Number of Family Support Workers not on a contract	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Armagh & Dungannon Locality	0	0.0	8	125 hours per week in total on average
Newry & Mourne Locality	0	0.0	0	0.0
Craigavon & Banbridge Locality	2	2.0	0	0.0

**Source:** Southern Health & Social Care Trust

**Notes:**

1. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
2. There is currently one vacancy (0.5 WTE) in the Craigavon & Banbridge locality for a Contracted Family Support Worker.

### Family Support Workers

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the Southern Health and Social Care Trust proposals to reduce Family Support Workers from eight workers to three on 18.5 hour weekly contracts, that would result in two in Armagh and one in Dungannon. (AQW 6459/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There is no proposal in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to reduce the number of family support workers. The Southern Trust has family support workers in each of its three localities which are based on Legacy Trust areas. These are managed and supervised under differing arrangements. The Trust is currently reviewing its family support services including the management and deployment of these staff. As part of this work, Trust management have begun meetings with family support staff.

### Family Support Workers

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children have been receiving assistance from a Family Support Worker in the Armagh and Dungannon areas because of incidences of domestic violence, broken down by each area. (AQW 6464/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not collected centrally, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

### New Regional Hospital for Children and Women

**Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what social clauses and affirmative action measures will govern procurement for the new Regional Hospital for Children and Women. (AQW 6465/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department will promote the social element of sustainable development through the incorporation of social clauses, as far as practicable, into the construction contract(s) for the procurement of the new Regional Hospital for Children and Women. These will be in accordance with the requirements of public sector procurement policy that is current at the date of procurement of the project.

My Department recognises the requirement to take affirmative action measures consistent with prevailing legislation and guidance.

## **New Regional Hospital for Children and Women**

**Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the proposed date is for the commencement of procurement for the Regional Hospital for Children and Women. (AQW 6472/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Timescales for the commencement of procurement in respect of this project can only be determined following approval of the business case and confirmation of availability of funding.

Under current funding constraints, construction of the Women's hospital is not due to begin until 2015/16 with commencement of the Children's in 2017/18.

## **Cervical Screening**

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there has been an increase in the numbers of women requesting cervical screening as a result of the publicity surrounding of Jade Goody's illness. (AQW 6526/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I refer the member to the answer I gave to Written AQ No 5928/09.

## **DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **Distribution of Department Publications**

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6109/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy):** My Department follows NICS guidance published in November 2008 on the Distribution of Departmental Publications and Consultation Documents. Sections 9 and 10 cover electronic publication and state, "It is a matter of choice for the organisation(s) as to their preferred method of receipt of Government publications ....".

Assembly colleagues should inform my Department of their preference for how they wish to receive any communication and that will be complied with.

### **Road Surfacing Schemes**

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the road surfacing schemes, scheduled for the North Down area, in the next financial year. (AQW 6166/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that, in anticipation of financial allocations being finalised, the following carriageway resurfacing schemes have been provisionally programmed for completion in the 2009/10 financial year, within the North Down area:

- Whinney Hill, Holywood – part of; and
- Robinson Road, Bangor.

### **Footpath Resurfacing Schemes**

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the footpath resurfacing schemes, scheduled for the North Down area, in the next financial year. (AQW 6167/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that, in anticipation of financial allocations being finalised, the following footway resurfacing schemes have been provisionally programmed for completion in the 2009/2010 financial year, within the North Down area:

- Robinson Road, Bangor;
- Killeen Avenue, Bangor – Old Belfast Road to Doctor's surgery; and
- Clifton Road, Bangor.

### New Pedestrian Schemes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the new pedestrian schemes, scheduled for the North Down area, in the next financial year. (AQW 6168/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that the full 2009/10 Programme of Work, for pedestrian schemes in North Down area, has not yet been established. However, I can advise that controlled pedestrian crossing facilities will be provided at each of the following locations:

- Castle Park Road, Bangor – near the museum entrance; and
- Gransha Road, Bangor – with the junction of Bloomfield Road.

I have asked Mr Tom McCourt, the Divisional Roads Manager for Eastern Division, to write to you with details of proposed pedestrian schemes, when the full programme has been confirmed.

### New Traffic Light Schemes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the new traffic light schemes, scheduled for the North Down area, in the next financial year. (AQW 6169/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that, the full 2009/10 Programme of Work for traffic light schemes in North Down area has not yet been established. However, I can advise that schemes listed in AQW 6168/09 will be included in this programme of work.

I have asked Mr Tom McCourt, the Divisional Roads Manager for Eastern Division, to write to you with details of proposed traffic light schemes, when the full programme has been confirmed.

### Disabled Parking

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain why the Department has a requirement that an applicant for a disabled parking bay must be the driver of the car rather than the spouse or a resident of the car owner's address. (AQW 6178/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that disabled parking bays are only provided for those who would benefit most from their provision. Bays that are provided can be used by any blue badge holder and cannot be reserved for the exclusive use of an applicant.

It is considered that in normal circumstances, it would not be unreasonable to expect the driver of a vehicle to stop for a short time to help a person, with a disability, to get to and from the vehicle and then to find a suitable place to park, if required.

In areas where residents find it difficult to park close to their homes, bay provision can have a significant impact. It is for this reason that Roads Service would only provide a disabled parking bay, when the need has been established and this is done through the satisfaction of a number of criteria, including that the applicant must normally be the driver of the car. Extending our policy beyond the existing criteria, could lead to a proliferation of under-used bays, exacerbating parking difficulties for other drivers and making enforcement difficult.

Disabled parking bays are, therefore, normally only provided for disabled drivers, but they may, in cases of special hardship, be provided for disabled passengers.

### Disabled Parking

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what are 'exceptional circumstances' when his Department is considering whether to waive the criteria for the allocation of a disabled parking bay. (AQW 6179/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that disabled parking bays are normally only provided for disabled drivers, but may, in cases of special hardship, be provided for disabled passengers. This requires a letter from a consultant physician confirming that the disabled person cannot be left unattended.

### Part-Time EO11 Positions

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many part time positions in the EO11 grade (Promotion Board– EO11 (PR 003/01 carried forward to PR 006/05) have been filled in Departments located within travel to work distance of Londonderry/Derry. (AQW 6185/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** There is no record of any officer in any Department having been promoted from either of the boards concerned into a part-time EO11 post within the area specified.

### Pressure Management Programme

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain why the water pressure at 16 and 23 Ballybrian Road, Greyabbey has not been acceptable since before December 2008. (AQW 6199/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that an ongoing pressure management programme is being implemented in the Greyabbey area as an effective means of preventing bursts and reducing mains leakage. While water pressure has been reduced in the area, NIW can confirm that the current pressure at 16 and 23 Ballybrian Road is in excess of the minimum standard it aims to provide, of at least 15 metres head at the stop tap at the boundary, as set out in its customer charter.

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many Water Service staff have been based in Londonderry/Derry in each of the last 3 years, broken down by division; (ii) whether any proposals have been brought forward or are being developed which may affect the number of its staff in Londonderry/Derry and (iii) what impact any such proposals may have on NI Water employment levels in Londonderry/Derry. (AQW 6203/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the number of its staff based in Derry during the last three years is as follows:-

Directorate	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Asset Management	35.5	36.5	35.5
Customer Services	11	3	3
Operations	76	104	124
Engineering Procurement	9	8	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>131.5</b>	<b>151.5</b>	<b>170.5</b>

NIW is reviewing its telemetry and work planning activities currently provided from Derry and Belfast, but the impact of this proposal on NIW staff levels in Derry is not known at this time.

### US Pre-Clearance at NI Airports

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) whether he has had any discussions in relation to the establishment of United States Customs Border Protection Pre-Clearance at Northern Ireland airports; and (ii) what further plans he has to pursue this. (AQW 6205/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department has consulted Belfast International Airport which has no plans to seek such facilities, the establishment of which is not a devolved matter.

## Road Projects

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Regional Development to (i) list all road projects; and (ii) detail the value of each investment (a) for this year; and (b) planned for the next financial year. (AQW 6212/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I would refer the Member to my 6 March 2009 reply to Assembly Question AQW 5490/09.

## M2 Improvement Scheme

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5548/09, to detail (i) the total number and types of trees being planted; (ii) the total number and types of shrubs being planted; (iii) the estimated completion date of the landscaping; and (iv) the total cost of the landscaping. (AQW 6216/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that a wide variety of different plant types will be planted along the M2 to create a range of planted areas, ranging from wildflower grassland to hedgerow, and from native woodland plants to specimen trees. Each planted area will contain a variety of different plant species. For example, those areas identified for native woodland planting will be planted with the following trees and shrubs between 0.75-1.5 metres apart:-

### Trees

- 7.5% Common Alder;
- 7.5% Common Birch;
- 5% Common Ash;
- 10% Scots pine; and
- 10% Mountain Ash.

### Shrubs

- 15 % Hazel;
- 15% Hawthorn;
- 15% holly; and
- 15% Blackthorn.

The landscaping along the M2 is expected to be substantially completed during April this year.

The M2 Improvement scheme and associated landscaping is being undertaken as part of the Roads Service DBFO Package 1 Contract. Under this type of contract Roads Service does not hold details of the cost of individual elements of work, such as landscaping. However, as I indicated in a previous reply some 44,000 trees and shrubs will be planted as part of the project.

## 11 July Bonfires

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in developing a new policy on 11 July bonfires. (AQW 6231/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I can advise that my Department's Roads Service is not developing new policy or undertaking any review in relation to Eleventh Night bonfires.

The Member may be aware that, while bonfire management is an inter-agency issue, Roads Service has the power, under the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, to remove bonfire material on or near a public road, which may constitute a danger to road users. Roads Service will continue to take a joint approach with the other agencies in the management of bonfire sites.

You may be interested to note that Belfast City Council intends to continue its successful Bonfire Management Programme for another year. I understand that the Council has developed its Bonfire Beacon Structure, which will make beacons available to interested communities.

## Flags and Emblems

**Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in developing a new flags and emblems protocol between his Department and other statutory agencies; and when this protocol will be in place. (AQW 6233/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service have, through written submissions and attendance at review meetings, contributed to the review of the "The Joint Protocol in Relation to the Display of Flags in Public Areas", initiated by OFMDFM in April 2008.

I understand that completion of the flags protocol review is subject to progress of work undertaken by OFMDFM, to review and refresh the current "A Shared Future" policy and "Racial Equality" strategy.

The Member will know that it is my view that the current protocols are outdated and although they may achieve successful resolution to these issues in some areas, they do not in many others. I have also met Chief Constable, Hugh Orde, PSNI, in relation to the role that the Police must play by way of enforcement, in addition to the work of other agencies, such as Roads Service.

## Road Traffic Signs

**Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the measures which his Department was obliged to take in the last five years to monitor the performance of companies who are contracted for the supply and delivery of permanent and temporary road traffic signs; (ii) the measures that were used for monitoring in the last five years; and (iii) the findings of these monitoring exercises. (AQW 6236/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In my response to your previous Assembly Question AQW 4646/09, I informed you that my Department's Roads Service's improved procedures, for monitoring the contract for the supply and delivery of traffic signs, were instigated in March 2003. This was in accordance with recommendations made by our internal auditors. These improved procedures have been in place for the current contract, which was awarded in 2005.

The information you have requested on the findings of these monitoring exercises is being collated, and I have asked Roads Service officials to forward it to you, as soon as it is available.

## Road Resurfacing

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to resurface the roads in the Wandsworth Road area of Bangor. (AQW 6245/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by my Department's Roads Service that there are no current plans, to carry out any carriageway resurfacing in the area of Wandsworth Road, Bangor.

## Footpath Resurfacing

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to resurface the footpaths in the area of Wandsworth Road, Bangor. (AQW 6246/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by my Department's Roads Service that there are no current plans, to carry out any footway resurfacing work in the area of Wandsworth Road, Bangor.

## Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the (i) projects; and (ii) amount of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6264/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Information on projects and capital investment planned for the North Down constituency is set out below:

## Roads

There are no major road schemes programmed for the North Down constituency area up to 2011.

Roads Service does not hold details of capital infrastructure projects on a parliamentary constituency basis. However, information on other capital expenditure projects with a value of less than £500,000 in the North Down constituency for the next two financial years will be provided in the Spring 2009 Council Reports for North Down and Ards. Council reports can be viewed at [http://www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council\\_reports.htm](http://www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm).

It is anticipated that that the projected capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for 2009/10 and 2010/11, will be similar to the £963,000 spend in financial year 2008/09.

## Rail Projects

Subject to the agreement of capital plans with Translink, which is an on ongoing process, the following capital rail investment is planned for the North Down constituency in 2009/10 and 2010/11.

Project	Capital Spend 2009/2010	Capital Spend 2010/2011
Bangor Line Signalling System	£150,000	£10,000
Helen's Bay Retaining Wall	£35,000	£0
Bangor West Path	£10,000	£270,000

As part of the project to purchase 20 new trains some of the platforms on the rail network will be extended, this may include platforms in the North Down constituency. It is likely that the investment in new trains will directly benefit residents in North Down, using rail services.

## Northern Ireland Water

The following projects are planned for the North Down constituency in 2009/10. Northern Ireland Water's development plans from 2010/11 onwards will depend on the outcome of the price control review which will be undertaken in 2010, following which a prioritised programme of capital work will be developed.

Project	Capital Spend 2009/10	Capital Spend 2010/2011
Briggs Rock Outfall	£5.9 million	NIL
North Down/Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	£1.7 million	NIL
Seahill Wastewater Treatment Works	£7.0 million	NIL
Bangor Zone Watermain Improvements	£2.8 million	NIL

There are a number of smaller water and wastewater infrastructure improvement projects planned within the North Down constituency each with a value of less than £500,000. The current estimated cost of these projects is £550,000.

## Road Maintenance

**Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his Department's assessment of (i) the wet weather skidding resistance of all road surfaces on (a) trunk roads; (b) A; and (c) B class roads; and (ii) whether the spending on roads maintenance over the past two years has improved the wet weather skidding resistance of all roads. (AQW 6307/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service constantly strives to improve road safety standards. One means of achieving this is to ensure that roads have a satisfactory level of skidding resistance, which reduces the risk of uncontrolled skids and improves braking efficiency. Roads Service has a programme of measuring skidding resistance, using the Sideways-force Coefficient Routine Investigation Machine (SCRIM), and reports annually on the percentage of the network which is equal to or below the relevant investigatory level.

The most recent survey results available indicate that some 42.8% of the trunk road network and around 33.9% of the non-trunk, A Class network, are at or below the relevant skidding resistance investigatory level. Routine

measurements of skid resistance using the SCRIM vehicle are not carried out on the B class network, so I cannot provide the information requested for these roads.

It is important to note that a road with a skidding resistance below the investigatory level is not necessarily unsafe; it simply means that there is a need for further investigation, to determine the need for maintenance, if appropriate. Roads Service engineers carry out these investigations on all roads that are found to be below the investigatory level and arrange remedial work, where necessary.

Timely resurfacing and surface dressing of roads will enhance their skidding resistance. In the last two years, some 3907 km of the road network has received treatment (resurfacing and/or surface dressing) thereby making a positive contribution to skidding resistance.

### **Traffic Management Assessment**

**Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would carry out a detailed traffic management assessment of Newcastle, to identify improvements required to facilitate future economic development. (AQW 6361/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service will continue to work with elected representatives, traders and residents, to identify local improvements which will assist with traffic progression in Newcastle. However, as indicated in previous replies to the Member, Roads Service does not propose to carry out detailed, and expensive, traffic management assessments in Newcastle, to identify improvements for possible future economic development. The preferred approach is to examine any proposals, as and when they are received, and have the required traffic assessments carried out by the applicant.

As a result of recent meetings with the Newcastle Steering Group, it is proposed to restore two lanes of traffic to Main Street, by the end of March 2009. It is hoped that other improvements can be made in the next financial year, although such measures will be subject to design and financial constraints.

### **Foyle Ferry Service**

**Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will urgently consider amending the definition of 'road' in the Roads (NI) Order 1993 to allow subsidisation of the Loyal Foyle Ferry Service and provide a benefit to the local community. (AQW 6417/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member will be aware that my Department was not involved in the creation of this ferry service, nor does it have legislative or direct operational responsibility. However, in the absence of other Departments or Ministers accepting responsibility, I have offered to work with all parties to see if solutions to its financial problems can be found.

I have previously made it clear that there are already many pressures on the funding available for Roads Service, and I do not foresee my Department taking over responsibility for this ferry service. I am therefore not minded to amend the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993. That said, I am hopeful that in highlighting the problems being encountered by the ferry service and urgently canvassing support from all possible interested parties, the necessary financial support can be secured.

### **New A1 Dual Carriageway**

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reasons why the Forkhill Road will have to close during the building of the new A1 dual carriageway despite assurances, given to local residents at Killeavy in late 2008 by the contractor that this would not be the case. (AQW 6418/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that the closure of the Forkhill Road is required to safely undertake works that are necessary to improve the level and alignment of a short stretch of the Forkhill Road, as it approaches the new enlarged roundabout. This work is planned to commence at 7.00pm on Friday 27 March 2009 and will continue until 6.00am on Monday 30 March 2009.

I understand that a meeting took place on 15 October 2008, with residents from the area and Lagan Ferrovial, the Construction Contractor. At this meeting, the contractor, in reply to a question about the closure of roads at

Cloghogue Roundabout, indicated that access would be maintained on all approaches during the day. However, the Contractor has now progressed their works as far as possible, using normal traffic management measures, and they do now require a short weekend closure to safely complete the work. The Contractor's earlier advice to local residents was given in good faith, based on the information available at that time.

I am further advised that the Contractor has undertaken extensive consultation in the area, about this road closure with residents, the local parish and local businesses. This matter was also the subject of discussion at the Community Liaison Meeting held on Friday 13 March 2009, which was facilitated by the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council.

Roads Service and Lagan Ferrovial understand the disruption and inconvenience which this weekend road closure may cause in the area, and very much appreciates the communities patience, in these circumstances. Roads Service and their technical advisers will continue to work closely with the contractor to seek to minimise the negative impact of the construction of this important strategic road improvement scheme.

### **Improving Roads in County Fermanagh**

**Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's plans for improving roads in County Fermanagh over the 2009/10 financial year. (AQW 6424/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Investment Delivery Plan for Roads, published in April 2008, identified a number of major road schemes that are to be delivered in Fermanagh during the ten year period 2008-2018.

Works have recently been completed in Enniskillen, where an additional traffic lane was provided at the Henry Street/Sligo Road junction, which previously created a significant bottleneck, particularly during the summer months.

A scheme to provide improvements on the A32 between Omagh and the Dromore Road at Mullaghbane is ongoing and is anticipated to be completed by May 2009.

In addition to this current scheme, an improvement strategy for the A32 trunk road has been developed, and a rolling programme of both on-line and off-line improvement works is in place.

It is anticipated that the first of these schemes will be to widen and realign the carriageway, while making provision for right turning vehicles, will be implemented at Sidaire crossroads. It is envisaged that work on this scheme, which is estimated to cost £800,000, will commence towards the end of the 2009/10 financial year, however, this is dependant on the acquisition of the necessary land by agreement.

Construction of 20km of dual carriageway on the A4 between Dungannon and Ballygawley, and the realignment and widening of 3.8km on the A4 at Annaghilla, is also progressing well and is expected to be completed by the end of 2010.

The proposed construction of the Cherrymount Link in Enniskillen, a 1.1km link road that will connect the B80 Tempo Road to the A32 Irvinestown Road, is expected to commence in 2009/10, subject to satisfactory progression through the procurement process and availability of finance. This scheme will provide relief to the Gaol Square junction and the town centre area.

Consultants are also to be commissioned before the end of March 2009, to assist Roads Service in the development of a route corridor for a southern bypass of Enniskillen. Another proposed scheme which is located within, or will directly impact on, Fermanagh is the A4 Fivemiletown Bypass.

### **Water Supply Breaks**

**Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development, following interruptions to mains water supply in parts of the Ards Peninsula in recent weeks that culminated in the widespread unavailability of water supply to many hundreds of people during the weekend of 21-22 March 2009, to detail the reasons for these breaks in supply and what assurance he can give that there will be no further unscheduled interruptions. (AQW 6516/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the recent interruptions to the water supply in the Ards Peninsula area were caused by unforeseen defects in a trunk main and a number of other defects on smaller distribution mains.

You will appreciate that it is not possible to guarantee against defects to any water supply system but NIW does undertake extensive monitoring and maintenance of its infrastructure to minimise the risk of interruptions to the water supply.

### Water Supply Breaks

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the water supply breaks in Portaferry that lasted for 48 hours, why there was a breakdown in communicating to people that the water would not be on for an extended period of time; and why bottled water was not given out to those with special needs like mothers, children and the elderly. (AQW 6527/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that while work was progressing to restore the water supply to the Portaferry area, various media outlets were issued with press releases and interviews were given to local radio stations to inform customers of developments. In addition, extra staff were made available at NIW's Customer Contact Centre to provide customers with the latest available information on the water supply position.

Water tankers and bowsers were deployed as it became clear that the interruptions to the water supply would be prolonged for some customers. An emergency supply of bottled water was issued with emphasis given to priority customers.

### Water Supply Breaks

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he will be taking to address the repeated water breaks and the non-supply of water at the Ballybloey Road, Greyabbey, since Christmas. (AQW 6528/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is aware of a number of interruptions to the water supply in the Ballybloey Road area of Greyabbey which have been caused by burst water mains. In view of the frequency of the interruptions, NIW is investigating the feasibility of implementing infrastructure improvements to ensure continuity of supply in the area.

I have asked the Acting Chief Executive of NIW, Chris Mellor to write to you when the outcome of the investigation is known.

## DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Childcare and Early Years Interventions

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what assessment has been made of the need for childcare and early years interventions; and (ii) what statutory provision exists for childcare and early years interventions, in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 5926/09)

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie):**

- (i) Early Years childcare is a function carried out by the Department of Education. The policy lead on childcare overall lies with the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister at present. The need for childcare and early years provision in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas is assessed in the development of Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans. Whilst many communities have identified childcare as a priority, current provision is inconsistent, complicated and much of it operates at risk. I have welcomed the work being undertaken by the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People to bring coherence to childcare provision.
- (ii) Although DSD has no statutory obligation to provide childcare, I recently committed £1.5 million to sustain over 2,000 weekly childcare places, in disadvantaged communities, for a further twelve months to allow time for a coherent approach to be developed. As with all aspects of Neighbourhood Renewal, which is the

Executive's strategy for tackling deprivation, progress depends on the support of all Departments. Table 1 below details provision by my Department in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas by parliamentary constituency.

**TABLE 1: DEPARTMENTS OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CHILDCARE/EARLY YEARS PROVISION IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL AREAS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY**

Provision	Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Parliamentary Constituency
Focus on Family – Family Nurturing Programme	Ballysally	Coleraine East
Ballee After Schools	Ballymena	North Antrim
Ballee Pre School	Ballymena	North Antrim
Children's High Intensity Playcare Services (CHIPS 2)	Ballymena	North Antrim
Chrysalis Women's Centre	Brownlow	Upper Bann
Drumcree Community Trust – Afterschools & homework	North West Portadown	Upper Bann
First Friends Bangor	Kilcooley	North Down
Ashling Centre – Little Darlings Creche	Enniskillen	Fermanagh and South Tyrone
Strathroy Afterschools	Omagh	West Tyrone
The Womens Centre	Triax – Cityside	Foyle
Waterside Women's Group	Waterside	Foyle
Dunluce Family Centre Lifestart Programme	Outer West	Foyle
Tullycarnet Community Forum	Tullycarnet	Belfast East
Newtownards Road Women's Group	Inner East Belfast	Belfast East
East Belfast Community Education Centre	Inner East Belfast	Belfast East
Greenway Women's Centre	Inner East Belfast	Belfast East
An Droichead	Inner South Belfast	Belfast South
Southcity Resource & Development Centre	South West Belfast	Belfast South
Windsor Women's Centre	South West Belfast	Belfast South
Ardmonagh Family & Community Group	Upper Springfield / Whiterock	Belfast West
Falls Women's Centre	Falls/Clonard	Belfast West
Ionad Uibh Eachach	Falls/Clonard	Belfast West
Footprints Women's Centre	Colin	Belfast West
Hobby Horse Playgroup	Greater Shankill	Belfast West
Riddell Creche Association	Greater Shankill	Belfast West
Shankill Women's Centre	Greater Shankill	Belfast West
Manor Street Confident Cliftonville Community	Crumlin/Ardoyne	Belfast North
Glenbank Community Association	Upper Ardoyne/Ballysillan	Belfast North
174 After Schools Club	Inner North Belfast	Belfast North
Star Neighbourhood Centre	Inner North Belfast	Belfast North
Ashton Community Trust Kinderkids	Inner North Belfast	Belfast North

## Reducing Stress in the Workplace

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development given that stress is the primary reason for absence from work, what action she intends to take to improve motivation and morale and reduce stress in the workplace. (AQW 5950/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Department has, over the last couple of years, seen a downward trend in sick absence. This improvement can be attributed to the Department's Human Resources policy in providing flexible work/life balance, to the support available to staff who report stress-related illness, and to the action taken by managers to lead and encourage their staff and to provide a healthy and productive work environment.

The Department will continue to give high priority to managing sick absence, with plans to develop a more holistic approach to sick absence through health and safety in the workplace, health promotion and prevention and focused action on managing staff attendance. It is also planned to take part in a Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) stress survey using the Health and Safety Executives management standards. These standards will provide the platform to plan for future action in the Department to reduce sick absence, to train managers and to develop a productive and safe work environment.

## Charity Commissioners

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made in relation to the appointment of the Charity Commissioners. (AQW 5989/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** My Department is currently engaged in the public appointments process and advertisements appeared in the press in week commencing 19 January 2009. Interviews are scheduled for 24 and 25 March and, subject to the outcome of the selection panel's deliberations, I hope to be in a position to announce appointments to the Charity Commission in April.

## Energy Savings

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Social Development how many inquiries there have been about energy savings from homes in (i) Larne (ii) Carrickfergus and (iii) Newtownabbey, in each month, in the last two years. (AQW 6008/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have been advised by Eaga that they do not record details of energy efficiency enquiries and can therefore only report on actual referrals recorded. The number of referrals received for Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey, in each month, in the last 2 years is shown in table 1. No referrals for the Warm Homes Scheme have been taken from January 2009 as the budget for this year has all been committed. My department has met and, I anticipate will exceed, its Public Service Agreement target of alleviating fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy efficiency measures.

Northern Ireland Energy Agency (NIEA) is a member of the Bryson Charitable Group who through the management and operation of the Energy Saving Trust Advice centre, offer free and impartial telephone advice to households across Northern Ireland on energy efficiency. NIEA currently hold details of the number of energy efficiency enquiries for the 3 year period 1st April 2005 to the 31st December 2008 for each of the local authorities. However, they are unable to produce figures for each financial year or per constituency.

The total number of enquiries recorded by NIEA is detailed in table 2.

**TABLE 1**  
**WARM HOMES REFERRALS**

Month	Carrickfergus	Larne	Newtownabbey
April 07 Total	8	2	24
May 07 Total	4	6	29
June 07 Total	6	16	23
July 07 Total	1	8	24

Month	Carrickfergus	Larne	Newtownabbey
Aug 07 Total	2	10	25
Sep 07 Total	6	31	49
Oct 07 Total	11	10	98
Nov 07 Total	65	14	81
Dec 07 Total	28	9	36
Jan 08 Total	14	12	29
Feb 08 Total	8	6	33
Mar 08 Total	8	6	24
April 08 Total	6	6	20
May 08 Total	8	4	20
Jun 08 Total	22	19	52
Jul 08 Total	18	8	30
Aug 08 Total	11	5	30
Sep 08 Total	11	9	51
Oct 08 Total	20	7	47
Nov 08 Total	6	9	25
Dec 08 Total	0	1	6
<b>Totals</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>756</b>

TABLE 2

Local Authority Location	No. of Enquiries
Larne	4,116
Carrickfergus	9,575
Newtownabbey	16,169

### Heating Schemes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development what new heating schemes will go into the North Down area in the next financial year. (AQW 6013/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the very significant shortfall in budget, the Housing Executive is not yet able to confirm the contents of its programme of improvement and maintenance schemes for 2009/10. A revised programme of upcoming improvement schemes will be formulated and the Housing Executive's District Housing Plans, due for publication during summer 2009, will contain the relevant scheme information. The delivery of this programme will be dependent on the availability of finance.

### Maintenance Schemes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development what new maintenance schemes will be carried out in the the North Down area in the next financial year. (AQW 6014/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the very significant shortfall in their budget, the Housing Executive is not yet able to confirm the contents of its programme of maintenance schemes for 2009/10. A revised programme of upcoming schemes will be formulated

and the Housing Executive's District Housing Plans, due for publication during summer 2009, will contain the relevant information. The delivery of this programme is dependent on the availability of finance.

### Neighbourhood Renewal

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development how many economic projects have been funded under Neighbourhood Renewal in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Brownlow; and (iii) Portadown, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 6019/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information is as follows:

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Number of Economic Projects Funded		
	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Lurgan	None	None	None
North West Portadown	1	None	1
Brownlow	None	None	2

### Neighbourhood Renewal

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for economic re-generation projects have been submitted by (i) Lurgan Forward; (ii) Craigavon Borough Council; and (iii) Craigavon Industrial Development Organisation, in each of the last 2 years (AQW 6020/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information, which relates to applications/expressions of interest submitted through Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships, is as follows:

Organisation	Number of Applications Submitted	
	2007/2008	2008/2009
Lurgan Forward	None	None
Craigavon Borough Council	1	1
Craigavon Industrial Development Organisation	None	1

### Neighbourhood Renewal

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the expenditure of projects in each category in each of the Neighbourhood Renewal areas in Craigavon, including money that was unspent and allocated elsewhere. (AQW 6021/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** All of the funding allocated to the 3 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in Craigavon was spent in those areas. The information, for the current financial year, is as follows:

#### EXPENDITURE 2008 - 2009

Category	Brownlow	Lurgan	NW Portadown	Total
Social Renewal	£286,840.15	£368,094.52	£159,578.48	£814,513.15
Economic Renewal	£124,100.00	£0.00	£70,974.54	£195,074.54
Physical Renewal	£564,761.79	£748,419.40	£44,030.77	£1,357,211.96
Community Renewal	£68,407.66	£32,909.24	£29,515.11	£130,832.01
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>£1,044,109.60</b>	<b>£1,149,423.16</b>	<b>£304,098.90</b>	<b>£2,497,631.66</b>

### Disability Living Allowance

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) children under 18; and (ii) adults with disabilities have been denied Disability Living Allowance, for each of the last three years. (AQW 6046/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Department does not hold figures for children and adults separately in respect of disallowances. Everyone has the right to apply for Disability Living Allowance. No one should ever be denied this right. All applications are decided in line with the regulations governing benefit and some are disallowed because the conditions for entitlement to Disability Living Allowance are not satisfied. The table below provides details of how many Disability Living Allowance claims have been disallowed in each of the last 3 years

#### DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE

Year	Claims Received	Claims Disallowed
2005/06	46,468	13,494
2006/07	47,089	14,066
2007/08	50,700	17,261

### Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwelling Scheme

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how much money was spent on the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwelling scheme; (ii) to list each group that threatened the residents; and (iii) whether any members of the PSNI were beneficiaries of the scheme. (AQW 6050/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The table below details the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's expenditure on the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings scheme. The information requested on individual applications is not available. Under the Scheme if the Chief Constable issues a certificate confirming that a threat or intimidation exists, this is sufficient for the Housing Executive to administer the scheme without the need for further information.

Financial Year	Total
2003/04	£44,598,284
2004/05	£7,132,021
2005/06	£10,172,504
2006/07	£3,242,200
2007/08	£4,963,290
2008/09*	£9,120,626
<b>Total</b>	<b>£79,228,925</b>

\* Up to 3 March 2009

### Community and Voluntary Sector

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the funding her Department provided to the community and voluntary sector, including a breakdown of groups receiving awards, in the last two years. (AQW 6051/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** In 2007/08 my Department provided a total of £34,497,493 and in 2008/09 at a total of £38,884,475, to the community and voluntary sector.

This does not include funding disbursed through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) or provided through local councils in respect of the Community Support Programme (CSP).

A detailed breakdown of the groups and the amounts of funding by year has been placed in the Assembly Library.

### People Diagnosed as Alcoholics

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development how many people were diagnosed as alcoholics and what benefits did they receive for their condition, in the last financial year. (AQW 6093/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Department does not collect information on the number of people diagnosed as alcoholics. A diagnosis of alcoholism does not, in itself, establish entitlement to any social security benefits.

### Community Care Grants

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have been refused (i) a crisis loan; (b) a community care grant; and (c) both of these, in the last two years. (AQW 6095/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information requested is not available in the form requested as the Social Fund Management Information System only records statistical information in relation to the total number of applications made and not on an individual basis. The number of Crisis Loan and Community Care Grant applications refused in the last two years is outlined in the Table below.

Year	No of Crisis Loan Applications Refused	No of Community Care Grant Applications Refused
2007/08	20,861	19,418
2006/07	20,857	22,806

### Community Care Grants

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have been denied (i) crisis loan; (ii) community care grant; (iii) crisis loan and community care grants. (AQW 6106/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Everyone has the right to apply for a Crisis Loan and/or Community Care Grant under the Social Fund Scheme. No one should ever be denied this right. All applications received are considered by a Decision Maker who will decide on entitlement to a payment based on the information provided. Not all applications will however be successful for a variety of reasons including failure to satisfy the qualifying conditions. The number of applications received and refused in the last 3 years are set out in the tables below.

#### COMMUNITY CARE GRANTS

Year	Applications Received	Applications Refused
2006/07	50,985	22,806
2007/08	44,998	19,418
*2008/09	45,350	20,596

#### CRISIS LOANS

Year	Applications Received	Applications Refused
2006/07	107,534	20,857
2007/08	100,887	20,861
*2008/09	114,754	21,892

\* information only available to 28th Feb 2009

### Distribution of Department Publications

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Social Development if she will ensure that MLAs have the choice of receiving reports and consultation documents in either electronic or hard copy form. (AQW 6171/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** My Department adheres to the guidance supplied by OFMDFM relating to the distribution of Departmental publications and consultation documents. This guidance stipulates that MLAs be advised when reports or consultation documents are published and where these documents, either electronically or in hardcopy, can be obtained.

### Citizens Advice Bureaux

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development what funding has been made available (i) directly from her Department; or (ii) from her Department through local Councils, to Citizens Advice Bureaux, in each of the last five years. (AQW 6180/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** May I refer Mr Weir to AQW 4889 tabled by Mr Ken Robinson. The information you require in response to this question was placed in the Assembly Library on 23 February 2009.

### Citizens Advice Bureaux

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development how much funding is being made available to Citizens Advice Bureaux in 2009/10. (AQW 6181/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** My Department directly funds Citizens Advice Regional Office through the Regional Infrastructure Programme. For the 2009/10 year they will be able to claim up to £664,918.57 subject to funding conditions being met. The Department also contributes £1.9m towards the provision of local advice services; this funding is matched by local councils who contribute a further £1.9m. Local Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) and other local voluntary advice providers can apply to councils for financial support. Subject to appraisal Neighbourhood Renewal in the North West will provide £124,424 to the Derry CAB.

### Social Housing Projects

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Social Development to list all the social housing projects under way in the East Londonderry constituency; and the total value of each investment. (AQW 6209/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information you have requested is outlined below. Table 1 shows details of the new-build scheme currently on site in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency.

Table 2 shows details of Northern Ireland Housing Executive planned improvement schemes currently onsite in the Limavady and Coleraine District Office areas (which include the East Derry/Londonderry constituency boundaries).

TABLE 1. SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Housing Association	Scheme	Units	Type	Need Group	Onsite Year	Completion Year	Total Costs
Clanmil	Greysteel Ph2, Limavady	11	NB	General	2007/08	2009/10	£1.6m

TABLE 2. HOUSING EXECUTIVE PLANNED IMPROVEMENT SCHEMES (CURRENTLY ONSITE)

District Name	Scheme Name	Work Group	Total Value (£)
Coleraine	Blackthorn	Multi Element	1,276,000
Coleraine	Cuilrath Street	Multi Element	2,128,070

District Name	Scheme Name	Work Group	Total Value (£)
Coleraine	Upper Glebe Avenue	Multi Element	1,988,000
Coleraine	Portrush & Garvagh	Ext Cyclic Maint	695,600
Coleraine	Ballysally Area 5 Kit	Revenue Replacement	249,458
Coleraine	Ballysally Area 2	Revenue Replacement	357,723
Coleraine	Portrush/Portballintrae	Revenue Replacement	409,524
Coleraine	Coleraine Macosquin	Revenue Replacement	700,000
Coleraine	17 Ent/3 Hami/59 Rosemary	Adaptations	112,390
Limavady	Ard-Na-Smoll/Gortnaghey	Heating Installation	280,989
<b>Total</b>			<b>8,197,754</b>

### Maintenance Schemes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development to list all maintenance schemes earmarked for North Down, in the next financial year. (AQW 6242/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the very significant shortfall in budget, the Housing Executive is not yet able to confirm the contents of its programme of maintenance schemes for 2009/10. A revised programme of upcoming improvement schemes will be formulated and the Housing Executive's District Housing Plans, due for publication during summer 2009, will contain the relevant scheme information. The delivery of this programme will be dependent on the availability of finance.

### Maintenance Schemes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development to list all maintenance schemes earmarked for the Donaghadee area, in the next financial year. (AQW 6243/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the very significant shortfall in budget, the Housing Executive is not yet able to confirm the contents of its programme of maintenance schemes for 2009/10. A revised programme of upcoming improvement schemes will be formulated and the Housing Executive's District Housing Plans, due for publication during summer 2009, will contain the relevant scheme information. The delivery of this programme will be dependent on the availability of finance.

### Maintenance Schemes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development to list all maintenance schemes earmarked for the Millisle area, in the next financial year. (AQW 6244/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the very significant shortfall in budget, the Housing Executive is not yet able to confirm the contents of its programme of maintenance schemes for 2009/10. A revised programme of upcoming improvement schemes will be formulated and the Housing Executive's District Housing Plans, due for publication during summer 2009, will contain the relevant scheme information. The delivery of this programme will be dependent on the availability of finance.

### Housing Executive

**Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) home reposessions there are; (ii) people on the Housing Executive's waiting list; and (iii) points, on average, are required to gain housing, in Armagh City. (AQW 6255/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** During this financial year the Housing Executive recovered possession of one property within the Armagh District Office area. At 31st December 2008 there were 823 housing applicants on the waiting list for social housing for the Armagh District Office area. The table below details the points and allocations during the period 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2008 in Armagh District Office area.

Points	Total allocations
<30pts	4
30-39 Pts	7
40-49 Pts	4
50-59 Pts	2
60-69 Pts	2
70-79 Pts	5
80-89 Pts	5
90-99 Pts	6
100+	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>

### Housing Executive

**Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide Housing Executive waiting lists statistics for each district council. (AQW 6256/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information is not available in the format requested. The table below details the social housing waiting list at 31 December 2008 by Housing Executive District Office area.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive District Office	Applicants at 31 December 2008
Belfast West	2334
Belfast East	1895
Belfast North	2429
Belfast Shankill	869
Belfast South	2286
Bangor	1874
Castlereagh	1364
Downpatrick	1266
Lisburn Antrim Street	2039
Lisburn Dairy Farm	620
Newtownards	1644
Armagh	823
Banbridge	697
Dungannon	894

Northern Ireland Housing Executive District Office	Applicants at 31 December 2008
Fermanagh	925
Lurgan	1265
Newry	1800
Portadown	747
Antrim	1004
Ballycastle	358
Ballymena	1542
Ballymoney	530
Carrickfergus	1034
Coleraine	1350
Larne	496
Newtownabbey 1	841
Newtownabbey 2	944
Cookstown	388
Waterloo Place	800
Waterside	865
Collon Tce	723
Limavady	527
Magherafelt	498
Omagh	658
Strabane	499
<b>N. Ireland</b>	<b>38,828</b>

### Ardcarne Park Environmental Improvement Scheme

**Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if the Ardcarne Park environmental improvement scheme has been factored in the Housing Executive budget. (AQW 6257/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Due to the collapse of the land and property market, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive expects to have a shortfall of £100m across its budget in each of the next 2 years. This has resulted in a formal review of all improvement and maintenance schemes, such as this one at Ardcarne Park.

A revised programme is being developed and will be published in due course once funding is available.

### Community Workers

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development when she will make a decision on the position of the community worker in Bloomfield Estate, Bangor, whose salary runs out at the end of March 2009. (AQW 6291/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Housing Executive has confirmed that the housing community worker post will be funded for 2009/10.

### Pensioner Bungalows

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development when she will make a decision on the maintenance scheme for pensioners bungalows at Ballyree Drive, Bangor, which have been condemned as a health hazard since 2002. (AQW 6292/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the very significant shortfall in their budget, the Housing Executive is not yet able to confirm the contents of its programme of maintenance schemes for 2009/10. A revised programme of upcoming schemes will be formulated and the Housing Executive's District Housing Plans, due for publication during summer 2009, will contain the relevant information. The delivery of this programme will be dependent on the availability of finance. In the meantime the Housing Executive will continue to carry out a repair service to the properties.

### Social Security Offices

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Social Development what the average waiting time is for a job interview at the Social Security Offices in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Portadown; and (iii) Banbridge. (AQW 6297/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Jobs and Benefits Service is jointly delivered by the Social Security Agency (SSA) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). An initial job interview comprises two parts:

1. A claim form check undertaken by SSA staff
2. A work focussed interview (WFI) carried out by DEL staff.

During February 2009 the average waiting times for a first interview were as set out below:

Social Security Office	Average Waiting Time (days)
Lurgan	6.35
Portadown	9.56
Banbridge	2.69

### Social Housing

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what the level of need is for social housing in (a) Lurgan; (b) Craigavon; (c) Portadown; and (d) Banbridge (ii) what steps she has already taken since taking up office to meet this need; and (iii) what further plans she has to meet this need. (AQW 6298/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The table below details the level of housing need for the Lurgan, Portadown, Craigavon and Banbridge areas.

	*Applicants	*Housing Stress	**Relets	***Projected Need
North Lurgan	545	237	59	260
South Lurgan	336	125	61	80
Portadown 1	180	77	46	55
Portadown 2	558	178	158	90
Central Craigavon	254	95	96	6
Banbridge	430	233	66	185
<b>All Areas</b>	<b>2303</b>	<b>945</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>676</b>

\* Applicants and Housing Stress at December 2008

\*\* Average Annual Relets 2004-2008

\*\*\* Projected social housing need from March 2008 to March 2013

Since I took up office in May 2007 a total of 84 newbuild units have been started by Housing Associations in the Upper Bann Constituency which includes Lurgan, Portadown, Craigavon and Banbridge. Six of these units are for people with learning difficulties and the remainder are classified as General Needs.

In respect of my plans for next year, the Social Housing Development Programme is currently being finalised and when available, will outline the new housing provision that will be delivered across Upper Bann and indeed Northern Ireland over the next five years. The Programme will be published on the Housing Executive's website at [www.nihe.gov.uk](http://www.nihe.gov.uk) and I will place a copy in the Assembly Library.

### Maintenance Schemes

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Social Development what maintenance schemes will go ahead in the (i) Lurgan; (ii) Portadown; and (iii) Banbridge areas, for Housing Executive tenants, in the next financial year. (AQW 6299/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Due to the review of the Housing Executive's programmes, caused by the very significant shortfall in their budget, the Housing Executive is not yet able to confirm the contents of its programme of maintenance schemes for 2009/10. A revised programme of upcoming schemes will be formulated and the Housing Executive's District Housing Plans, due for publication during summer 2009, will contain the relevant information. The delivery of this programme will be dependent on the availability of finance.

### Housing Executive

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Social Development the number of vacant Housing Executive properties in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Craigavon; (iii) Portadown; and (iv) Banbridge. (AQW 6300/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** At 1st March 2009 the number of vacant Housing Executive properties was as follows:

Craigavon (Lurgan & Brownlow): 102 properties

Portadown: 42 properties

Banbridge: 54 properties

### Disability Living Allowance

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development how many Disability Living Allowance awards for an indefinite period have been withdrawn, in the Strangford constituency, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 6320/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The table below provides detail of the number of indefinite awards of Disability Living Allowance where entitlement was removed in each of the last three years in the Strangford constituency.

#### DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE

Year	Indefinite Awards Removed
2005/06	5
2006/07	7
2007/08	16

### Departmental Accounts

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to outline the process by which her Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits her Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail her Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6349/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** My Department's Resource Accounts are audited under the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, and in accordance with United Kingdom Auditing Standards, as issued by the Auditing Practices Board. The annual audit is completed by the Comptroller & Auditor General of the Northern Ireland Audit Office. It is not practical to provide details of the last 3 year's Accounts in this response. However, the Member will be aware that the published versions of the final audited accounts for each year, are available from the Assembly library.

### Housing Executive

**Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive staff from the West Belfast District have been moved to other areas; and the reasons for the moves. (AQW 6375/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Over the past two years 10 staff have moved out of the West Belfast District office, all on secondment.

### Housing Executive

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development how many vacant Housing Executive properties there are in the North Down Council area. (AQW 6385/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** There are 189 vacant properties within the Housing Executive's Bangor District Office which includes the areas comprising the North Down Borough Council area.

### Pensioner Bungalows

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development how many pensioner bungalows in the Bloomfield Estate, Bangor, still require to be rebuilt or have maintenance done to them. (AQW 6393/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** There are 71 pensioner bungalows in the Bloomfield Estate in Bangor which still require to be rebuilt or have maintenance done to them.

### Recent Visit to the United States

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Social Development to (i) outline the purpose of her recent visit to the United States; (ii) detail the costs involved with this trip, including (a) flights; (b) hotels; and (c) transportation; and (iii) detail how many officials were in attendance and their associated costs. (AQW 6395/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The main purpose of my visit to the United States was to gain further understanding of how the American City, State and Federal Authorities deliver Housing and Urban Regeneration Programmes and how that can inform our work in Northern Ireland. In particular, I was able to explore how their experiences might help us tackle our divided communities and build a Shared Future, as I believe that segregation impedes community development and perpetuates disadvantage.

My visit proved to be very productive with more than 20 meetings with senior Political Representatives and officials from both philanthropic and not for profit organisations in New York City, Annapolis, Maryland and in Washington DC.

In addition, my visit also allowed me to participate in the St Patrick's Day programme in Washington and attend a number of functions as a member of the Executive, along with my colleagues the First and deputy First Minister. These functions included a reception at the White House with President Obama.

My Private Secretary and Special Adviser and one Senior Departmental Official accompanied me to the United States. My officials have not yet been provided with the final costs of the trip and at present I am only able to detail that the total cost of flights was £9351.75. I will write to the member as soon as the details of the other expenses which he has requested become available.

## Incapacity Benefit

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total number of people currently claiming incapacity benefit whose primary diagnosis in medical assessments was obesity. (AQW 6409/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The total number of people claiming Incapacity Benefit whose primary diagnosis in medical assessments was obesity, is 64. The date of extract was 24 January 2009 and is the most recently available data.

## NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

### E-mail Facilities

**Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission if it will consider surveying MLAs to see how many are able to use e-mail facilities. (AQW 6005/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** The Assembly Commission has no specific plans to survey MLAs to see how many are able to use e-mail facilities. However, the Commission's Corporate Plan for the period from 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2011 includes a commitment to undertake a survey of Members across a range of services. In addition, the Corporate Plan includes an action to develop and implement a Members' development programme. It is likely that the Members' survey will help to decide what issues may be included in this development programme.

### Computer/E-mail Training

**Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission which MLAs have availed of computer/e-mail training. (AQW 6077/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** Whilst it is not appropriate to comment on whether individual Members have availed of training opportunities, I can confirm that both the IS Office and the Assembly training and development officer have provided informal training sessions, on specific topics, to those Members who have requested training since the start of the current mandate.

### Assembly Translators

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Assembly Commission if Assembly translators of Ulster Scots or Irish are authorised to provide Assembly Members with translations of speeches to be made on the floor of the House. (AQW 6083/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** As you will be aware, the complement of the Office of the Official Report (Hansard) includes provision for staff to provide reporting and interpreting services in respect of Irish and Ulster Scots.

I can inform you that, in working to achieve its objectives of producing and publishing accurate, consistent and timely Hansard reports, and in providing accurate and timely interpreting services for the Speaker and Clerks at Table, the Office can provide Members with pre-reporting translation services. However, such services will be provided only when the material in question is considered suitable, is for a Member speaking in a personal capacity and resources are available. All requests for translations should be made through the Editor/Deputy Editor, who will decide whether such a service could and should be provided in the circumstances that apply at the time.

### Assembly Web Services

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Assembly Commission whether it is aware of complaints from Assembly Members that there are ongoing problems of accessibility to Assembly Web Services from constituency offices, and what steps will be taken to solve the problem. (AQW 6086/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** I would refer you to Assembly Questions AQW 2606/08, AQW 3232/08, AQW 8185/08, AQW 1924/09 and 4914/09 for previous replies on this and related matters.

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 which affects both outgoing and incoming internet access. 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. This work is currently underway.

### Assembly Questions and Answers

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Assembly Commission whether there is an intention to make a publicly available searchable database similar to that on AssISt, on the website to allow members of the public to search for and view Assembly questions and answers. (AQW 6090/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter):** 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, and to develop, and enhance the content provided. The enhanced content will include the integration of the Assembly Information Management System (AIMS), currently available on AssISt, allowing users of the website to search for and view Assembly questions and answers.

### Cost of Heating in Parliament Buildings

**Mr Durkan** asked the Assembly Commission (i) what is the annual financial cost of heating in Parliament Buildings; (ii) what assessment has been made of carbon emissions resulting from heating the building; (iii) what advice has been received in relation to heating the building; and (iv) whether existing practice conforms to advice received. (AQW 6097/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):**

(i) The table below details the financial cost of heating Parliament Buildings:

Year	Expenditure
2006 - 2007	£56,139.00
2007 - 2008	£62,852.00
2008 - 2009	£74,537.56

Year to date – Jan 09

(ii) The Assembly Commission has taken part in the Public Sector Energy Campaign since 1999. This records all aspects of our energy performance, including carbon dioxide emissions and is available online through the Department of Finance and Personnel website. Further to this in December 2008 Parliament Buildings was awarded a display energy certificate rating of 'C' which compares favourably with other similar buildings. The table below lists the total carbon dioxide emissions for Parliament Buildings from 1999-2007.

Year	Total Carbon Emissions (Tonnes)
1999-2000	1,957,054
2000-2001	1,957,054
2001-2002	1,902,015
2002-2003	1,869,301
2003-2004	1,732,190
2004-2005	1,807,617
2005-2006	1,384,004

Year	Total Carbon Emissions (Tonnes)
2006-2007	1,362,357

- (iii) The Assembly Commission tasked the Carbon Trust with carrying out an assessment of energy saving opportunities for Parliament Buildings in June 2008. This report detailed various initiatives, both short and long term, to improve the overall energy performance of Parliament Buildings. In addition, the Commission works closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel's Engineering Services and Energy Unit to progress energy saving initiatives.
- (iv) The existing practice does conform to the advice received. Further to this advice Properties Directorate are in the process of reviewing the current building energy management system with a view to upgrading it. This will allow us to better regulate and control the heating and cooling systems in the building.

### MLA Trips

**Mr Lunn** asked the Assembly Commission to detail the amount spent on sending MLAs on trips outside Northern Ireland, broken down by Assembly Committee or group, in (i) the 2007/2008 financial year; and (ii) the 2008/2009 financial year. (AQW 6117/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** Financial reports for committee members' spend on travel and subsistence are available. However, the reports do not differentiate between spend incurred while on visits inside Northern Ireland and spend incurred while on visits outside Northern Ireland. In addition, due to a change in accounting arrangements in April 2008, the figures available for 1 April 2008 – 31 December 2008 also include the cost of staff travel on committee visits.

The financial report for the period 1 April 2007 – 31 March 2008 indicates that £57,559.40 was spent on committee members' travel and subsistence. This includes the cost of all committee visits inside and outside Northern Ireland.

The financial report for the period 1 April 2008 – 31 December 2008 indicates that £69,836.28 was spent on committee travel and subsistence. This includes the cost of all committee visits inside and outside Northern Ireland and the cost of staff travel on committee visits.

The Appendix attached details the amount spent by each committee on members' travel and subsistence for the 2007/2008 financial year and up to 31 December 2008 for the 2008/2009 financial year. Financial reports do not currently differentiate between expenditure on visits within Northern Ireland and those outside of Northern Ireland. The tables below therefore include the cost of all committee visits inside and outside Northern Ireland. In addition, due to a change in accounting arrangements, the figures provided for the 2008/2009 financial year also include the cost of staff travel on committee visits.

## APPENDIX

1 April 2007 – 31 March 2008	Committee	Amount spent £
	Committee for the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister	9113.02
	Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development	8883.16
	Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure	3679.57
	Committee for Education	2634.70
	Committee for Employment and Learning	200.00
	Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment	80.00
	Committee for the Environment	515.00
	Committee for Finance and Personnel	0
	Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety	11664.28
	Committee for Regional Development	6695.16
	Committee for Social Development	884.58
	Public Accounts Committee	304.92
	Assembly and Executive Review Committee	0
	Committee on Standards and Privileges	4611.46
	Committee on Procedures	8293.55
	Audit Committee	0
	Business Committee	0
		<b>Total £57,559.40</b>

1 April 2008 - 31 December 2008	Committee	Amount spent
	Committee for the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister	10375.50
	Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development	9607.59
	Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure	1653.72
	Committee for Education	875.50
	Committee for Employment and Learning	483.59
	Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment	512.82
	Committee for the Environment	77.27
	Committee for Finance and Personnel	0
	Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety	3682.86
	Committee for Regional Development	3408.04
	Committee for Social Development	33910.38
	Public Accounts Committee	930.60
	Assembly and Executive Review Committee	0
	Committee on Standards and Privileges	4169.43
	Committee on Procedures	148.98
	Audit Committee	0
	Business Committee	0
		<b>Total £69,836.28</b>

### Assembly Shop

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to its answer to AQW 5367/09, to provide a list of (i) Local Enterprise Agencies; and (ii) local crafters, that it contacted. (AQW 6174/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** Attached is a list of all Local Enterprise Agencies that the Assembly contacted in relation to the development of the Assembly Gift Shop.

Through the Local Enterprise Agencies, local crafters then made contact with the Assembly with a view to displaying/selling their goods in the Assembly Gift Shop. As the Gift Shop developed a number of crafters also made contact with other crafters (through other networking channels) advising them of the initiative.

### Engagement Strategy

**Mr Attwood** asked the Assembly Commission to confirm the costs involved in delivering the commitment of the Commission to ‘an annual public audit’ and the appointment of a continuous professional development co-ordinator’ as outlined in its Engagement Strategy. (AQW 6549/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** The cost of the annual public audit, which will be met from within the existing budget for the Engagement Directorate, is estimated to be approximately £40k. The Assembly Secretariat already has a Training and Development Coordinator, and it is intended that this person will additionally have responsibility for the continuous professional development of Members.

## Assembly Festival

**Mr Attwood** asked the Assembly Commission what are the estimated costs of holding an annual Assembly festival and being represented at local events including the Balmoral Show; the Belfast Festival at Queens; and summer schools. (AQW 6552/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** The estimated costs of the Assembly Festival are £100k. In addition, the Commission is proposing to develop a significant exhibition which will move around Northern Ireland, and which will form a centre piece of the Assembly Festival. The additional cost of this exhibition is estimated to be £100k.

The Engagement Strategy also outlined that the “Assembly will be represented at local events of strategic importance, for example, the Balmoral Show, the Belfast Festival at Queen’s, summer schools etc.” Whilst the detail of this work, including the events to be attended, has not been finalised, this activity will be undertaken by existing staff within the Assembly’s External Liaison Unit within existing budgets.

## Engagement Strategy

**Mr Attwood** asked the Assembly Commission to confirm the costs involved in delivering the commitment of the Commission to (i) ‘the recruitment and appointment’ of an individual with journalistic experience; (ii) the development of a communication strategy; and (iii) the complete redevelopment of the Assembly website. (AQW 6553/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):**

- (i) The staffing complement of the Engagement Directorate includes provision for three Information Officers; the appointment of an individual with journalistic experience will involve one of these existing posts being re-graded to Deputy Information Officer. Therefore this does not represent any additional cost to the Assembly Secretariat, and in fact presents a small saving.
- (ii) The development of a communication strategy will be undertaken ‘in house’ by the Head of Media Services, at no additional cost.
- (iii) The complete redevelopment of the website, incorporating the following elements, is estimated to cost £750k:

Technical design study	£60k
Design, including graphic design of Internet and Intranet	£50k
Migration and cataloguing of content (1998 to present)	£65k
Redesign of business processes and development of supporting workflows	£75k
Integration with key systems (e.g. AIMS and Broadcasting)	£150k
Development of live streaming/playback functionality	£150k
E-Petitioning	£50k
Development of Educational functionality	£150k

A project team has been established to oversee the redevelopment of the website, and the first stage of this work will be the development of a business case for consideration by the Assembly Commission.

## Engagement Strategy

**Mr Attwood** asked the Assembly Commission to confirm the costs involved in delivering the commitment of the Commission to (i) providing an additional committee room with video conferencing facilities; (ii) implementing broadcasting facilities in all committee rooms; and (iii) live screen/recorded broadcasting of all committees in public session. (AQW 6554/09)

- (i) The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray): Provision of an additional Committee room with video conferencing facilities is estimated to cost £150k, and is dependent on the outcome of the ongoing accommodation strategy.
- (ii) Implementing video conferencing facilities in all Committee room is estimated to cost £60k.
- (iii) The cost of live screen/recorded broadcasting of all Committees in public session (£150k) is included within the scope of the website redevelopment project.

### Assembly Roadshows

**Mr Attwood** asked the Assembly Commission to confirm the costs involved in delivering its commitment in relation to the delivery of outreach events and public meetings, including the costs for each of the Assembly roadshows; and to confirm the numbers that attended each roadshow to date. (AQW 6602/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** The Engagement Directorate currently deliver a wide range of outreach events and public meetings, and this activity will be continue to be undertaken by existing staff within the Assembly's External Liaison Unit, within existing budgets.

The cost of the road shows has not been finalised as they are still ongoing, however the primary costs are newspaper advertising and venue costs. Estimated costs for this expenditure, together with the number of attendees, are as follows:

Roadshow	Advertising cost	Venue hire cost	Venue Audio-Visual and Set up Labour costs	Number of attendees
Parliament Buildings	£0	£0	£1,680	80
Coleraine	£1,969.61	£400.00	£1,680	48
Ballymena	£2,252.48	£404.06	£1,680	36
Newry	£1,574.50	£564.20	£1,680	30
Enniskillen	£1,786.08	£236.65	£1,680	36
Armagh	£3,711.93	£690	£1,680	59

### Fair Employment Tribunal

**Mr Attwood** asked the Assembly Commission to confirm the number of legal proceedings pending against it, including cases before the Fair Employment Tribunal. (AQW 6606/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** There are currently 9 cases which are at varying stages of litigation. Two of these cases are in respect of one former member of staff and are enjoined as a single Fair Employment Tribunal case.

### Engagement Strategy

**Mr Attwood** asked the Assembly Commission to confirm the costs involved in delivering its commitment to the development of a public café, provision of improved signage, a visitor centre with permanent exhibits, a retail/bookshop, a dedicated education room and a 'mini' assembly chamber. (AQW 6609/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** The Engagement Strategy summarises a range of initiatives already being undertaken by the Commission, as well as a number of new initiatives, some of which require the development of separate business cases. These business cases will be considered by the Commission on their respective merits, and funding bids then made.

The Commission has estimated that the following new initiatives, if business cases are approved, would require additional expenditure, as follows:

- |  |                        |
|--|------------------------|
| • Development of a public café   | £30k                   |
| • Provision of improved signage  | Costs to be determined |
| • A visitor centre with permanent exhibits, a retail/bookshop, a dedicated education room and a ‘mini’ assembly chamber (subject to the development of the Accommodation Strategy) | £500k                  |

### **Engagement Strategy**

**Mr Attwood** asked the Assembly Commission whether it considered and agreed the costs involved in the commitments contained in its Engagement Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly. (AQW 6610/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Moutray):** Yes. The costs involved in the commitments contained in the Engagement Strategy were considered and agreed by the Commission on 13th January 2009.

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 3 April 2009

## Written Answers to Questions

### OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

#### Planning Appeals Commission

**Mr Elliott** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if planning applications refused under PPS14 will continue to be considered by the Planning Appeals Commission under the criteria set out in PPS14 or under the new criteria in PPS21. (AQW 5861/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness):** The Planning Appeals Commission is an independent tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, its Chief Commissioner has been asked to provide a response directly to you, and we understand that she has written to you in the following terms:

“I have been asked to provide you with information requested in the above Assembly Question.

In determining appeals the Planning Appeals Commission must have regard to the development plan (if material) and to any other material considerations.

Each appeal submitted to the Commission is considered and determined in the context of the evidence presented by all participants in that appeal. The Commission would expect that evidence to include the relevant Planning Policy Statements.”

#### Commissioner for Children and Young People

**Mr Weir** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what controls exist to monitor the expenditure of the Northern Ireland Children’s Commissioner. (AQW 5965/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The amounts paid in legal fees by the Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland in each of the last three years were:

2005/2006	£27,360.68
2006/2007	£39,336.68
2007/2008	£52,914.55

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has various controls in place to monitor the Commissioner’s expenditure. These controls in the main are operated by its sponsoring body, the Children and Young People’s Unit within OFMDFM.

The relationship between the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Commissioner is set out in the Management Statement and Financial Memorandum (MSFM). The MSFM sets out the broad framework within which the Commissioner operates and is based on a Treasury model. The Financial Memorandum section of the MSFM sets out in great detail certain aspects of the financial provisions, which the Commissioner is required to observe. The MSFM is “signed off” by the Commissioner and the OFMDFM Accounting Officer.

OFMDFM and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) also agree the Commissioner's business plan. The Business Plan includes key targets and milestones for the year immediately ahead, and links to budgeting information so that resources allocated to achieve specific objectives can readily be identified by OFMDFM.

To monitor actual expenditure against planned expenditure, the Commissioner's monthly draw down requests are accompanied by monthly profiles and explanations on expenditure, which are scrutinised before approval of payment is given. Also, updates are requested from the Commissioner at each of the financial monitoring rounds.

Quarterly liaison meetings take place between the Commissioner and departmental officials. An official from the Children and Young People's Unit also attends the Commissioner's Audit and Risk Committee quarterly meetings and reports back to the department any issues raised.

To monitor the Commissioner's accountability functions a senior OFMDFM official holds Accountability Meetings with the Commissioner and her Chief Executive every six months, mid year and end of year. The end of year meeting is attended by the Department's Accounting Officer.

In addition to these procedures, all circulars and guidance issued by DFP are brought to the Commissioner's attention.

However, we would ask you to note that, in order to ensure appropriate independence of the Commissioner's office, relationships between the Commissioner, Ministers and OFMDFM are governed by the 'arm's length' principle, wherein the primary role of Ministers is to set the Commissioner's legal and financial framework and the structure of her funding and management. Within this framework it is the role of the Commissioner to determine her policy and activities in keeping with her statutory responsibilities and the requirements of Assembly policy. OFMDFM has the right of access to carry out any examination of the internal financial control systems as may be required by its Accounting Officer.

The total amount of funding provided to the Commissioner in financial year 07/08 was £1,897,000.

### Commissioner for Children and Young People

**Mr Weir** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what was the total amount of funding for the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner, in the last financial year. (AQW 5966/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The amounts paid in legal fees by the Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland in each of the last three years were:

2005/2006	£27,360.68
2006/2007	£39,336.68
2007/2008	£52,914.55

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The total amount of funding provided to the Commissioner in financial year 07/08 was £1,897,000.

### Infrastructure Projects

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline all infrastructure projects planned for the East Londonderry constituency through the Investment Strategy; and the monetary value of each investment, up to 2011. (AQW 6210/09)

**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 East Londonderry and where costs cannot be disaggregated by constituency.

### Annex A

#### ISNI PROJECTS OF £500,000 & OVER IN EAST LONDONDERRY CONSTITUENCY UP TO THE END OF 2011

Department	Project Title	Value	Comments
Department of Education	Ballykelly Primary School	£4.5m	New Building & Nursery Unit on Existing Site. Due on site June 2010 to June 2012.
Department of Education	Rossmar Special School, Limavady	£6.5m	New Building on the former site of Limegrove Special School. Estimated cost. Due on site May 2010 to December 2011.
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment	Telecoms infrastructure projects – Northern Ireland Wide	£12.9m	£6.5m investment in 2009/10 & £6.4m investment in 2010/11. Although these projects are province wide they will include the East Londonderry constituency.
Department of Agriculture & Rural Development	Coleraine – Lodge Burn Flood Alleviation & Drainage Infrastructure Scheme	£1.3m	
Department of Agriculture & Rural Development	Limavady – River Roe Flood Alleviation Scheme	£4.5m	Due to commence prior to December 2011.
Department for Regional Development	Rail Projects Purchase 20 new trains sets to improve services on the Derry line and surrounding areas.	Not Available	Department for Regional Development are unable to provide costs at this stage.

Department	Project Title	Value	Comments
Department for Regional Development	Relay of line between Coleraine & Londonderry	£70m	Work commences in 2011 and extends beyond 2010/11. Costs are estimated.
Department for Regional Development	Extend track life between Ballymena & Coleraine	£12m	Expected to be completed by 2010. Costs are estimated.
Department for Regional Development	Sea Defences between Whitehead & Larne and Coleraine & Derry	£0.64m	Scheduled to complete in 2010. Costs are estimated.
Department for Regional Development	3 replacement bridges between Coleraine & Derry	£0.69m	
Department for Regional Development	Water Projects Limavady Wastewater Treatment Works	£5.3m	Northern Ireland Water does not hold details of capital projects broken down by parliamentary constituency. However, projects listed in this group are within the Coleraine & Limavady Borough Council Area, which covers most of the East Londonderry constituency.
Department for Regional Development	Portballintrae Zone Watermain Improvements	£4.3m	
Department for Regional Development	Portrush Sewer Improvements	£1.2m	
Department for Regional Development	Limavady Zone Watermain Improvements	£1.8m	
Department for Regional Development	Coleraine Drainage Area Plan	£0.6m	
Department for Regional Development	Ballinrees Central Zone Watermain Improvements	£1.0m	
Department for Regional Development	Benone Area Sewerage	£7.0m	
Department for Regional Development	Feeny Wastewater Treatment Works	£1.3m	
Department for Regional Development	Limavady Drainage Area Plan	£2.0m	
Department for Social Development	<b>Housing Projects</b> The new 5 year Social Housing Development Programme(2009/10 – 2013/14)	Not Available	This is a province wide scheme and costs are not available at this stage of the process. Any relevant schemes for this constituency will published on the Housing Executives website in due course.
Department for Social Development	Coleraine town centre – Public Realm works	£1.23m	Due to complete March 2009.
Department of Culture Arts & Leisure	Dungiven Library	£0.92m	Expenditure up to 2011. Estimate cost.
Department of Culture Arts & Leisure	John Mitchells GAC Claudy (Building Sports Programme	£0.7m	To commence May 2009. Expenditure up to 2011.
Department for Employment & Learning	High Voltage Replacement	£3.33m	University of Ulster, Coleraine Campus. Planned projects.
Department for Employment & Learning	Wind Turbines	£2.38m	
Department for Employment & Learning	Diamond Refurbishment	£2.20m	

**ISNI PROJECTS UNDER £500,000 IN EAST LONDONDERRY CONSTITUENCY UP TO THE END OF 2011**

Department	Projects	Group Value	Comments
Department for Regional Development	Roads Projects A number of Infrastructure projects	£0.86m	Roads Service does not hold details of capital projects on a constituency basis. However, information on other capital expenditure projects with a value of less than £500,000 in the East Londonderry is included in the Autumn 2008 council reports for Coleraine and Limavady. Please see :- <a href="http://www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm">http://www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm</a>
Department for Regional Development	Water Projects Water & wastewater infrastructure improvement projects	£0.15m	Current estimated cost of these projects.
Department for Regional Development	Bus Projects Workshop/garage related projects	£0.43m	
Department of Agriculture & Rural Development	Lower Bann Sluice Structures at Portna and Cutts - Painting and Renovation	£0.2m	Due to commence prior to December 2011
Department for Social Development	Blackburn Pass - Environmental Improvement Scheme	£0.06m	
Department of Culture Arts & Leisure	9 Sports Projects	£1.08m	
Department for Education and Learning	University of Ulster, Coleraine campus – Combined Heat & Power	£0.44m	Planned project.

**Northern Ireland Terrorist Victims Together**

**Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions have been held with Northern Ireland Terrorist Victims Together about funding for their organisation. (AQW 6369/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** There has been no approach to the department from a group named “Terrorist Victims Together” for help, advice or funding.

**Commissioner for Children and Young People**

**Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions it has held with the Commissioner for Children and Young People in relation to its annual budget. (AQO 2362/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** The Commissioner has a set budget to work within every year. The Children and Young People’s Unit (CYPU), in OFMDFM is the sponsoring body for the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Discussions take place between the Commissioner and officials in CYPU in relation to the Commissioner’s budget on a regular basis. CYPU discuss and agree the Commissioner’s annual Business Plan which is linked to budgeting information on the Commissioner’s objectives. The Commissioner’s financial performance is discussed at quarterly liaison meetings and also at the Commissioner’s Audit and Risk Committee meetings which an official from CYPU attends. Accountability meetings on the Commissioner’s expenditure are held with the Commissioner twice yearly.

### Efficiency Savings: Regional Co-operative

**Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what contact it has had with its counterparts in Scotland and Wales on identifying efficiencies that could be gained through closer co-operation between the three regions. (AQO 2364/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** We have an extensive range of ongoing contacts with our counterparts in Scotland and Wales. These are held both at official and at Ministerial level, on a formal and informal basis, and are aimed at improving co-operation and identifying synergies on issues of mutual interest. For example, we met the Prime Minister and the Heads of the Devolved Administrations on 25 February 2009 and agreed that all regions should consider and share instances of good practice and ideas which had been developed to effectively address problems emerging from the economic downturn.

In addition, the Minister for Finance and Personnel attended a quadrilateral meeting of Finance Ministers on 12 March 2009. One of the items for discussion during the course of the quadrilateral was the approach to delivering efficiency savings across the four jurisdictions over the period to 2010-11.

### Equality Commission: Amending Legislation

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it intends to bring forward amending legislation as requested by the Equality Commission. (AQO 2365/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission, wrote to Junior Ministers on 5 February 2009 to highlight a number of areas where the Commission believes that Northern Ireland equality legislation needs to be amended. The Commission submitted a detailed paper setting out six priorities for legislative amendment with a summary of the rationale underpinning each recommendation.

The Commission has recommended the introduction of new legislation to prohibit age discrimination in non-employment areas and has recommended significant amendments to five separate pieces of anti-discrimination legislation dealing with race, disability, sex and fair employment. Each of the recommendations would require the introduction of primary legislation to secure the necessary legislative change.

We need to ensure that our citizens enjoy the same rights and protections as others across the European Union. We will therefore consider the Commission's recommendations in conjunction with proposed developments elsewhere when deciding the future direction of anti-discrimination legislation here.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many employees in the Department travel from Derry/Londonderry to work in Belfast. (AQW 6720/09)

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** Two of our employees travel from Derry/Londonderry to work in Belfast.

## DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

### Farm Modernisation Scheme

**Mr Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the allocation of Farm Modernisation Scheme funding met with all the relevant EU legislative rules regarding the allocation of EU funds. (AQW 6347/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew):** The Farm Modernisation Programme is an integral part of the Rural Development Programme approved by the European Commission in July 2007. As such, my officials considered that it met all relevant EU legislation.

EU rules associated with implementing rural development programmes do not oblige my Department to seek clearance from the European Commission on either selection criteria or operational matters.

My Department is obliged to consult the Rural Development Programme's Monitoring Committee on the selection criteria and it has done so.

### **Farm Modernisation Programme**

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if the EU authorities have approved the application process for the Farm Modernisation Programme that commenced on 17th February 2009.

(AQW 6372/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** EU rules associated with implementing rural development programmes do not oblige my Department to seek clearance from the European Commission on either selection criteria or operational matters. Consequently, my Department did not seek the Commission's approval of the application process for the Farm Modernisation Programme. My Department is obliged to consult the Rural Development Programme's Monitoring Committee on the scheme selection criteria which it has done.

### **Badger Baiting**

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what co-operation exists between her Department and the Department of the Environment in relation to ending the practice of badger baiting.

(AQW 6414/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, it is an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal. It is also a specific offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal by causing, procuring, assisting or spectating at the baiting of that animal. Any person found guilty of these offences is liable, on summary conviction, to up to three months imprisonment or a fine up to £5,000 or both.

While the PSNI is responsible for enforcing animal welfare legislation with regards to non-farmed animals such as badgers, my officials form part of a multi-agency body known as The Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime (PAW). PAW partners include representatives of organisations involved in wildlife law enforcement including the PSNI, NI Environment Agency, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, conservation organisations, field sports organisations and land-owning interests. PAW liaises closely with the PSNI Wildlife Officer, and other key enforcement agencies. It aims to facilitate an exchange of information and also to increase public awareness of the key issues, including animal welfare, arising from badger persecution and illegal hunting of wild deer.

The issue of the level of penalties available to the Courts will form a significant part of my deliberations on new animal welfare legislation. It is my intention to ensure that the penalties available for animal cruelty, whether fines or custodial sentences, are a sufficient deterrent. This will include offences relating to badger baiting. When bringing forward my legislative proposals I will, of course, be liaising closely with the Environment Minister and my other Ministerial colleagues.

### **Meetings with MEPs**

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any meetings she has held over the past 12 months with Northern Ireland's three MEPs individually or as a group.

(AQW 6428/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Over the past 12 months, I have had 2 meetings with Jim Nicholson MEP, 1 meeting with Ms Bairbre De Brun MEP, and 1 joint meeting with Jim Nicholson and Bairbre de Brun.

### Careers in Fishing

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to encourage people into a career in fishing considering that only seven people responded to a fishing advertisement that was circulated to over 50,000 people. (AQW 6485/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The key encouraging people into a career in fishing is to have an efficient profitable industry which is of a size and capability appropriate to the fishing opportunities available to it. There are a range of financial assistance possibilities under Axis 1 of the European Fisheries Fund to help adapt the fleet to make it more economically efficient. I have asked the Fisheries Forum to advise me on how best to target the €14m of public money to achieve better profitability. I hope to receive the Forum's report shortly which will no doubt consider issues such as the attracting new entrants and maintaining skills in the industry.

### Small Boat Fishery

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she would support a locally based small boat fishery, targeting shellfish in Northern Ireland waters; and what management and encouragement her Department would be able to offer those interested in such a venture. (AQW 6715/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I am happy to support any fishery that is economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable and my Department will work with the industry to develop sustainable management measures for such fisheries. The inshore area is complex however with both static and mobile gear fishermen operating in the same areas as well as environmental designations, water quality and food hygiene issues to be considered. This means that any new proposals require careful consideration and the involvement of all stakeholders that may be affected.

### Mussel On-Growing Sites in Belfast Lough

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) If she is aware that an application for a mussel on-growing site in Belfast Lough had been submitted in 2001 by a Strangford constituent; and (ii) if she will advise where the application is in the process; and when the constituent can expect a decision. (AQW 6717/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I am aware there are a number of outstanding licence applications for mussel on-growing sites in Belfast Lough including one submitted by a Strangford constituent of Mr Shannon. These licence applications have been placed on hold due to the current moratorium on the granting of any further licences for the bottom culture of mussels. The moratorium was introduced because of concerns about the ability of local sea loughs to sustain what was a rapid development of the industry and about demand for seed exceeding supply.

Carrying capacity models have been developed and are being tested. Once fully operational the models will help inform decision-making on lifting the moratorium. Furthermore, one of the recommendations in a subsequent review of the bottom grown mussel sector is that no further sites should be licensed until the end of 2009 at the earliest. The moratorium therefore remains in place and I wrote to Mr Shannon's constituent in November 2008 to advise him of this position.

### Wild Mussel Fishery in Copeland Sound

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) if she is aware that a wild mussel fishery in Copeland Sound was planned for January 2009 in which 20 local vessels have expressed an interest and expended money for equipping the fishery; and (ii) if she can explain why the fishery has not yet been opened; and if she will confirm an opening date. (AQW 6718/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I am aware that some fishermen interested in this fishery may have hoped to be able to fish it by January 2009. However before this fishery can start several stages must be gone through. Management measures have to be agreed and this requires consultation with all relevant stakeholders that may be affected by this fishery. The fishery also requires an Appropriate (environmental

impact) Assessment due to its proximity to the Outer Ards Special Protected Area for birds and in order for the mussels to be sold directly for human consumption the area has to be classified by the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

A consultation on management measures was held from January to March and subject to a favourable Appropriate Assessment we intend to add these as conditions to the general fishing licence so that as soon as the area is classified by the FSA fishing may commence in a sustainable manner. I understand that the FSA may be in a position to classify the site during April.

### School Children Receiving Milk

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her Department's target to ensure that 100% of school children receive milk; and to give a time-scale for the completion of this target.

(AQW 6810/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I understand fully your desire to increase uptake under the EU School Milk Scheme but have to balance this with what is practical and achievable with the finite funding available.

My Department has been proactive to encourage uptake. This included writing on two occasions to the Chief Executive of each of the five Education and Library Boards and the Principals of all nursery and primary schools in the north of Ireland. In particular the letter outlined the important contribution that milk can make to a healthy balanced diet as well as encouraging those schools that did not provide drinking milk to pupils to consider doing so. I am pleased to advise that in 2007/08 almost 75% of nursery and primary schools in the North participated in the Scheme which compares with less than 40% in the South where a higher rate of national subsidy was paid.

My Department has also been working with the Dairy Council for NI (DCNI). In 2007/08 it was awarded funding under the Regional Food Programme for activity to encourage more schools to participate in the provision of dairy products under the Scheme and to communicate the benefits of taking school milk to parents of all P1 children. As a result a further 13 primary schools agreed to make milk available to pupils under the Scheme.

Recently this funding was complemented by almost €285,000 EU funding towards an information programme which aims to reinforce the role of dairy products in our daily breakfast and to increase uptake of milk under the EU School Milk Scheme. The programme commenced in October 2008 and it will use a mixture of radio and TV (both supported by PR activities), direct mail and school education to achieve its goal.

So the current position is that we are doing what we can to help the dairy sector under the EU School Milk Scheme.

### Horses Slaughtered in England

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide statistics or information held by her Department about the number of horses that leave here to be slaughtered in England for sale in the European market.

(AQW 6815/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Records for 2008 show 720 horses were exported from here for slaughter in Britain.

Records for 2009 to date show 190 horses were exported from here for slaughter in Britain.

### Single Farm Payments

**Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development considering issue of Single Farm Payments commenced at the beginning of December 2008, on what date did final farm inspections end for the 2008/09 year.

(AQW 6863/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The final inspection in relation to Single Farm Payment for the 2008/09 year was completed on 19/01/09, and covered the protection of water against nitrate pollution.

### **Dangerous Dogs Legislation**

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects to introduce dangerous dogs legislation in the Assembly. (AQO 2432/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My Review of the dangerous dogs legislation is drawing to a close.

I expect to have all the relevant evidence presented to me in a matter of weeks. I intend to bring forward proposals for consideration by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee in early May. I will then publish my proposals for consultation with key stakeholders.

I will then decide what legislation is needed.

### **Farm Modernisation Scheme**

**Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how applicants for the Farm Modernisation Scheme are classified; and (ii) if all the farmers who queued for funding were considered applicants; or only those that were successful in submitting an application. (AQO 2436/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** There is no classification of applicants and anyone who submitted an application whether it was over the counter, by proxy or by post is considered an applicant.

### **Farm Modernisation Scheme**

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the way in which the application process for the Farm Modernisation Scheme has reduced bureaucracy, considering that three out of four of the documents in the application process for the scheme were over ten pages long. (AQO 2437/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** My assessment of the application process based on the level of interest that has been expressed by farmers, and the feedback that I and the Department have received is, this programme has achieved reduced bureaucracy, has reduced red tape and the requirements to apply have been easily understood. This is borne out by the very low error rate on applications and the ease with which the applications are being processed.

### **Farm Modernisation Scheme**

**Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the decision to accept applications to the Farm Modernisation Programme on a first come first served basis was compliant with the Departmental Equality Impact Assessment for the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. (AQO 2438/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I believe that the first come first served method of accepting applications is compliant with the Equality Impact Assessment for the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. People who work in agriculture and live in rural areas have a right to be treated equally and I am keen to ensure that this issue is at the heart of the Department's work. The opportunity to submit applications was made as accessible as possible over the counter, in person or by proxy, and by post.

In addition, and in keeping with this ethos, you will be aware that I had asked for a review as late as last October to ensure that all stakeholders were on board with this approach. This indeed was the case as no other method was being put forward for consideration which could stand up to audit scrutiny and maintain my desire for reduced bureaucracy. I am content that it was the right thing to do but having said that, I have asked for a review of what happened and further consideration given to future tranches in light of the experiences on this first round.

### Woodland: Comprehensive Inventory

**Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she has given to creating and maintaining a comprehensive inventory of all woodland. (AQO 2439/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I have considered this matter in some detail as outlined in written answers to recent questions on the same subject from Mr D Ford (AQW 5818/09 and AQW 1912/09).

A very significant resource would be required to produce and periodically update a comprehensive woodland inventory. I am unable to commit the level of resource required at this time.

However, I have initiated a process whereby, in partnership with the NI Environment Agency (NIEA), other available woodland information will be collated to provide more comprehensive inventory data, allowing changes in woodland cover over the long term to be more fully captured.

### Rural Businesses

**Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to increase resources for promoting rural businesses. (AQO 2440/09)

### Farm Modernisation Scheme

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the correspondence her Department has received from the European Commission since the application deadline for the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQO 2441/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The deadline for submitting applications under the Farm Modernisation Scheme is 31 March 2009.

### Farm Modernisation Scheme

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the advice she sought and from what sources before introducing the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQO 2443/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** There are various stages European Programmes go through prior their implementation. This Programme was subject to an ex-ante appraisal, a policy appraisal, it was included in the Programme Document submitted to European Commission, legal advice was sought on a number of issues and it was also subjected to an economic appraisal. All of these stages were consulted on widely both internal and external to my Department and with the Monitoring Committee for the Fund.

### Farm Modernisation Scheme

**Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the statement by the spokesperson for the EU's Agriculture Commissioner, that her Department's method of allocating the Farm Modernisation Scheme was "unacceptable" as it does not comply with the EU rules for offering financial support on an equal basis to all applicants. (AQO 2445/09)

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** The statements by the European Commission's spokesman on the 17 February certainly escalated media interest in the Farm Modernisation scheme but did not alter my opinion that the scheme had a selection process in place that met all the EU legislative requirements.

## DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

### Neighbourhood Renewal

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding his Department or its agencies provide to Neighbourhood Renewal areas, broken down by (i) organisation; and (ii) Neighbourhood Renewal area. (AQW 6286/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr G Campbell):** The requested information, where available, is set out in the attached Annex A.

### Annex A

#### ARTS

The Arts Council Northern Ireland has targeted areas of social deprivation, including Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, through the Re-imaging Communities Programme.

The attached table details funding provided by the Arts Council Northern Ireland to NRAs through its Re-Imaging Communities Programme. Since 2006-2007 to date the Arts Council has awarded a total of £1, 484, 973 to projects within the NRAs through the Re-Imaging Communities Programme.

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Organisation	Funding (£)	Year
Colin	St Lukes Family Centre	12, 901	2007/08
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Tudor Renewal Area Residents Association	54, 315	2007/08
	Manor St. / Cliftonville Community Group	50, 000	2007/08
	Ardoyne Association	30, 520	2008/09
Falls/Clonard	An Nasc	4, 163	2006/07
	An Nasc	50, 000	2007/08
Greater Shankill	Greater Shankill Community Council	30, 890	2006/07
	Shankill Womens Centre	49, 999	2007/08
Inner East Belfast	Glentoran Football Club	27, 600	2007/08
	Belfast City Council	28, 325	2007/08
	Belfast City Council	17, 000	2007/08
	Clooney Estate Residents Association	44, 500	2007/08
	East Belfast Historical & Cultural Society	5, 267	2008/09
	East Belfast Historical & Cultural Society	6, 445	2008/09
Inner North Belfast	Tigers Bay Concerned Residents	90, 000	2008/09
	Tigers Bay Concerned Residents	20, 000	2008/09
	Tigers Bay Concerned Residents	15, 000	2008/09
Inner South Belfast	Belfast City Council - Lower Ormeau Residence	16, 000	2007/08
	Markets Developments Association	14, 381	2008/09
South West Belfast	Greater Village Regeneration Trust	57, 895	2006/07
	Arellian Nursery School	4, 570	2007/08

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Organisation	Funding (£)	Year
Tullycarnet	Charter for Northern Ireland (Tagit)	29, 624	2008/09
	Charter for Northern Ireland (Tagit)	46, 140	2008/09
Upper Springfield / Whiterock	An Munia Tober	7, 010	2007/08
	Upper Springfield Development Company Ltd	8, 950	2007/08
	An Munia Tober	21, 460	2008/09
	Upper Springfield Development Company Ltd	22, 000	2008/09
	Upper Springfield Development Company Ltd	30, 000	2008/09
Triax	Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership	46, 500	2007/08
	Cathedral Youth Club	44, 850	2007/08
	Long Tower Youth and Community Centre	11, 000	2007/08
	Creggan Enterprises Ltd	48, 400	2007/08
Outer North	Shantallow Community Residents Association	47, 800	2008/09
Outer West	Ballymagroarty Hazelbank Community Partnership	5, 900	2006/07
Waterside	Lincoln Courts Youth and Community Association	14, 650	2006/07
	Waterside Area Partnership	30, 000	2008/09
Limavady	Bovalley Community Association	7, 447	2007/08
	Roevalley Community Education Forum	7, 710	2007/08
Armagh	Armagh City and District Council	12, 780	2007/08
	Armagh City and District Council	68, 550	2007/08
	Darkley & District Community Association	9, 800	2007/08
Ballymena	Dunclug Partnership	5, 500	2006/07
	Harryville Partnership Initiative	15, 000	2006/07
Bangor	North Down Local Strategy Partnership	10, 639	2007/08
	Intra Community Cohesion Project	48, 290	2008/09
Brownlow	Craigavon Borough Council	43, 587	2007/08
	Drumbeg North & South Residents Association	15, 000	2008/09
	Craigavon Borough Council	17, 000	2008/09
Coalisland	Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	22, 550	2007/08
Downpatrick	Ballyhornan and District Community Asse	15, 000	2006/07

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Organisation	Funding (£)	Year
Dungannon	Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	10, 931	2007/08
	Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	81, 314	2007/08
Newry	Newry & Mourne District Council	49, 820	2007/08

In addition, a total of £46, 778 has been awarded through the Re-Imaging Communities Programme to District Councils and other organisations for projects which each cover several NRAs.

District Council	Organisation	Funding (£)	Year
Belfast City Council	Citywide Feasibility Study - large - this covers several neighbourhood renewal areas.	22,978	2007/08
	Chinese Welfare Assc	5,500	2007/08
City Council of Londonderry	Art and Re-imaging Feasibility Study - large - covers several neighbourhood renewal areas	18,300	2008/09

The Arts Council Northern Ireland also awarded the City Council of Londonderry a grant of £180, 254 in January 2005 under the Art of Regeneration Programme which works closely with the Re-imaging projects.

#### FORAS NA GAEILGE

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Organisation	Funding (£)
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Club Óige Mhachaire Botháin	3, 480
Inner South Belfast	An Droichead	2, 900
Falls/Clonard	Ionad Uíbh Eachach	3, 500
Inner North Belfast	Cumann Cultúrtha Mhic Reachtain	2, 370
Inner South Belfast	An Droichead	3, 430
Colin	Scoil na Fuiseoige	3, 500
Falls/Clonard	Coláiste Mhuire	1, 500
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Club Óige Machaire Bóthain	22, 469

#### GAELTACHT QUARTER

Neighbourhood Renewal Area	Organisation	Funding (£)	Year
Falls / Clonard	Gaeltacht Quarter Development Company	538, 000	2006
	Gaeltacht Quarter Development Company	500, 000	2007

### Neighbourhood Renewal

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to outline his Department's strategy for contributing to Neighbourhood Renewal objectives; (ii) what targeted measures are in place to deliver the objectives; and (iii) what funding is available to meet them. (AQW 6287/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The work of my Department and its arms length bodies, both in areas designated as Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs) and throughout Northern Ireland makes a real contribution to providing better opportunities for those in disadvantaged areas.

Examples of work my Department is doing in the most disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland, including in NRAs, are set out below:

- (i) The Arts Council Northern Ireland has specifically targeted areas of social deprivation, including NRAs, through its Re-imaging Communities Programme. One of the strategic themes of the programme is 'Working to complement the existing Neighbourhood Renewal programmes and policy'. The Arts Council Northern Ireland has been administering the Re-Imaging Communities programme over the period 2006/07 to the present.
- (ii) When it launched in July 2006, the programme aimed to deliver 60 to 80 community-based projects within three years, with a spend of £3million. This number of projects has been exceeded, with 112 projects funded to date.

The objective of the scheme is to help people feel part of the communities in which they live by enhancing the physical and natural environment; and removing displays of sectarian aggression and intimidation.

- (iii) The Arts Council Northern Ireland has awarded a total of £1, 484, 973 to projects within the NRAs through the Re-Imaging Communities Programme since it opened in July 2006.

In addition, a total of £46, 778 has been awarded through the Re-Imaging Communities Programme to District Councils and other organisations for projects which each cover several NRAs. The Arts Council Northern Ireland also awarded the City Council of Londonderry a grant of £180, 254 in January 2005 under the Art of Regeneration Programme which works closely with the Re-imaging projects.

The Arts Council Northern Ireland suspended the Re-imaging Communities Programme on 19 June 2008 as the budget had been assigned or earmarked in full. Following discussions with the Arts Council Northern Ireland, my Department submitted a bid in the September Monitoring Round exercise. On 3 November 2008, the Finance Minister, Nigel Dodds announced an additional £500k for the Re-Imaging Communities Programme in the September Monitoring Allocations.

- (i) Sport Northern Ireland's proposed Active Communities Investment Programme has been designed to employ, deploy and train a network of full time and part time sports coaches and leaders to deliver activities in community and club settings across Northern Ireland, with a view of increasing participation in sport and physical recreation, especially among under represented groups.
- (ii) Sport Northern Ireland is working in partnership with key stakeholders, e.g. Community/Voluntary, Statutory and Governing Bodies of Sport to achieve the following Programme Outcomes:
  - the creation of a network of community sports coaches and leaders to deliver sport and recreational activities in sports club and community settings;
  - increased participation in sport and physical recreation among under represented groups including young people, older people, women and girls, people with a disability, people from minority ethnic groups and people from socio-economically deprived groups;
  - the provision of opportunities that support lifelong participation in sport and physical recreation in sports club and community settings; and,
  - the development of effective working partnerships within and between district councils, governing bodies of sport, schools, sports clubs, and statutory, community and voluntary organisations.
- (iii) The programme is open to applications from 11 consortia of district councils as outlined in Model 11b of the Review of Public Administration Consultation (March 2005), and will be implemented between 1 April 2009- 31 March 2014.

Each consortium has been allocated an investment amount from the total available of circa £13m, based on population, health deprivation (need) and area. It is anticipated that this investment programme will create approximately 100 full time equivalent coaches who will deliver sport and physical activity across each consortium including NRAs.

### **Ireland Rugby Team**

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he would consider holding a reception for the Ireland Rugby Team at Parliament Buildings. (AQW 6525/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I have congratulated the Irish rugby team including current and former Ulster players; Stephen Ferris, Rory Best, Tom Court, Paddy Wallace and Tommy Bowe following their momentous victory over Wales in Cardiff to win the 6 Nations Championship, the Triple Crown and the Grand Slam and I propose to discuss with the Ulster Rugby Football Union any arrangements for marking this achievement.

### Northern Ireland Football Team

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he would issue a statement to congratulate the NI football team on the victory over Poland on Saturday, 28 March 2009. (AQW 6791/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** It would not be appropriate for me to issue a statement of congratulations every time the Northern Ireland team win a match. However I would hope to be in the position of being able to issue a statement of congratulations to the Northern Ireland football team when they have successfully qualified for the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa.

I will continue to support the Northern Ireland football team throughout the duration of the qualifying competition and wish them every success.

## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

### Retired Teachers

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education when her Department provided the latest guidance to schools about the re-employment of recently retired teachers. (AQW 5598/09)

**The Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane):** I mí na Samhna 2006, spreag an Roinn fostóirí, nuair a bhí folúntais le líonadh - folúntais sealadacha san áireamh, chun tosaíocht a thabhairt do mhúinteoirí nua chailithe nó do mhúinteoirí cleachta a bhí ag iarraidh fillleadh chuig an fhostaíocht. (Imlitreach na Roinne 2006/23).

The Department last exhorted employers in November 2006 to give preference to newly qualified or experienced teachers seeking to return to employment when filling vacancies, including those of a temporary nature (Departmental Circular 2006/23). This reinforced earlier advice given in December 1999 (Circular 1999/30) and August 1991 (Circular 1991/34).

Reports have been provided at intervals to Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools since 1994 to assist them in monitoring the re-employment of retired teachers.

### Capital Projects

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education to list all capital projects that have been delayed for more than 6 months. (AQW 6071/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá sonraithe i dTábla A thíos, príomhthionscadail caipitil atá i mbun pleanála agus a bhfuil moill níos mó ná sé mhí ag baint leo. Sonraíonn Tábla B cúig thionscadal a bhfuil an mhoill ama is faide orthu agus fad measta na moille.

Table A below details major capital projects in planning that have been delayed for more than six months. Table B details the five projects that have been delayed by the longest period of time and the estimated length of delay.

The projects identified have been subject to delay for a variety of reasons including site acquisition issues; review of projected long term enrolments; revised plans required; revisions to economic appraisals; and a legal challenge to the Major Works Construction Framework. The position has been assessed against the stage they might otherwise have expected to have reached by now.

TABLE A

School	Details of Project
St Mary's P.S. Portglenone	New school on extended site
St Joseph's P.S. Carryduff	New school on extended site
St Patrick's G.S. Downpatrick	New school on existing site
Our Lady & St Patrick's College	New school on existing site
Lagan College	Extension & Refurbishment
Tor Bank Special School	New school on new site
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	New school on existing site
Loreto G.S. Omagh	New school on existing site
Lurgan College	New school on existing site
Portadown College	New school on existing site
Methodist College, Belfast	Extension & Refurbishment
Omagh Integrated Primary School	New school on new site
Holy Family P.S. Magherafelt	New school on extended site
Carrick P.S. Warrenpoint	New school on extended site
St Columba's P.S. Straw	New school on new site
Magherafelt H.S.	New school on existing site
Whitehouse P.S. Newtownabbey	New school on existing site
St Clare's Abbey P.S. Newry	New school on extended site
Bangor Grammar School	New school on new site
Magherafelt P.S.	New school on new site
St Colman's P.S. Lambeg	New school on extended site
St Teresa's P.S. Lurgan	New school on extended site
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	New school on extended site
St Conor's P.S. Omagh	New school on extended site

TABLE B

School	Details of Project	Estimated Delay
Methodist College, Belfast	Extension & Refurbishment	23 months
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	New school on existing site	20 months
Loreto G.S. Omagh	New school on existing site	20 months
Holy Family P.S. Magherafelt	New school on extended site	17 months
Magherafelt P.S.	New school on new site	17 months

### Capital Projects

**Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education to list the five capital projects that have been delayed for the longest period of time and by how long each has been delayed. (AQW 6072/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá sonraithe i dTábla A thíos, príomhthionscadail caipitil atá i mbun pleanála agus a bhfuil moill níos mó ná sé mhí ag baint leo. Sonraíonn Tábla B cúig thionscadal a bhfuil an mhoill ama is faide orthu agus fad measta na moille.

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School	Details of Project
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St Patrick's G.S. Downpatrick	New school on existing site
Our Lady & St Patrick's College	New school on existing site
Lagan College	Extension & Refurbishment
Tor Bank Special School	New school on new site
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	New school on existing site
Loreto G.S. Omagh	New school on existing site
Lurgan College	New school on existing site
Portadown College	New school on existing site
Methodist College, Belfast	Extension & Refurbishment
Omagh Integrated Primary School	New school on new site
Holy Family P.S. Magherafelt	New school on extended site
Carrick P.S. Warrenpoint	New school on extended site
St Columba's P.S. Straw	New school on new site
Magherafelt H.S.	New school on existing site
Whitehouse P.S. Newtownabbey	New school on existing site
St Clare's Abbey P.S. Newry	New school on extended site
Bangor Grammar School	New school on new site
Magherafelt P.S.	New school on new site
St Colman's P.S. Lambeg	New school on extended site
St Teresa's P.S. Lurgan	New school on extended site
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	New school on extended site
St Conor's P.S. Omagh	New school on extended site

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Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	New school on existing site	20 months
Loreto G.S. Omagh	New school on existing site	20 months
Holy Family P.S. Magherafelt	New school on extended site	17 months
Magherafelt P.S.	New school on new site	17 months

### Transfer 2010

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education if the criteria proposed for Transfer 2010 has been the subject of equality screening; and if so, to detail what the outcome was. (AQW 6195/09)

**The Minister of Education:** I mo ráiteas chuig an Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009, rinne mé gealltanais le haird a thabhairt ar chomhionannas sna moltaí a bhain leis na Treoir 2010.

In my statement to the Assembly on 2 February 2009 I made a commitment to equality proof the recommendations contained within the Transfer 2010 guidance. That work is ongoing, and will involve the publication of an Equality Impact Assessment document for consultation. As part of the consultation process the Department of Education intends engaging with the Joint Consultative Forum, which provides a formal working link between public authorities in the education sector and the community and voluntary and trade union sectors and statutory equality authorities namely, the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council and the Human Rights Commission.

### Transfer 2010

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education if the criteria proposed for pupil Transfer 2010 has been discussed with the Equality Commission; and if so, what advice was given by the Commission. (AQW 6207/09)

**The Minister of Education:** I mo ráiteas chuig an Tionól ar 2 Feabhra 2009, rinne mé gealltanais le haird a thabhairt ar chomhionannas sna moltaí a bhain leis na Treoir 2010.

In my statement to the Assembly on 2 February 2009 I made a commitment to equality proof the recommendations contained within the Transfer 2010 guidance. That work is ongoing, and will involve the publication of an Equality Impact Assessment document for consultation. As part of the consultation process the Department of Education intends engaging with the Joint Consultative Forum, which provides a formal working link between public authorities in the education sector and the community and voluntary and trade union sectors and statutory equality authorities namely, the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council and the Human Rights Commission.

### Hope Centre in Ballymena

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education if funding could be provided to support the Hope Centre in Ballymena to help it to continue to educate young people about the misuse and abuse of drugs. (AQW 6218/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is mar chuid den sainchuram atá ag an Roinn Sláinte Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábhailteacta Póiblí é an beartas um drugaí agus alcól, agus an cistiú leis an bheartas seo a fheidhmiú.

Drugs and alcohol policy and the funding to implement that policy sit within the remit of Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety. My Department does not provide funding directly to any organisation to provide drugs and alcohol education.

However, schools and youth services have an important role to play in educating all our children and young people about the effects on the body of legal and illegal substances and the risks and consequences of their misuse. A number of steps have been taken to help schools to deliver this 'universal' drugs and alcohol education.

In May 2004, the Department issued Circular 2004/09, along with comprehensive guidance produced by a CCEA-led working group, to all schools on drawing up a drugs and alcohol policy and drug and alcohol education programme and on managing suspected drug and/or alcohol related incidents.

The revised curriculum includes a new area of Personal Development (PD) & Mutual Understanding/Learning for Life and Work, which provides opportunities for young people to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to deal with issues such as drugs and alcohol.

In addition, the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have Drugs Education Officers to provide support to schools and my Department allocates funding to each ELB and the Youth Council to support youth provision. Each of the boards issues funding for frontline youth provision which includes addressing, as part of an overall youth development programme, drugs and alcohol awareness sessions for young people.

### Lislagan Primary School

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education what action the North Eastern Education and Library Board will take in relation to car parking facilities at Lislagan Primary School after the recent meeting with stakeholders. (AQW 6241/09)

**The Minister of Education:** I ndiaidh cruinnithe ar 26 Feabhra ina raibh oifigigh ó Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt páirteach ann, cuireadh in iúl don scoil gur chóir di foirm iarratais ar mhionobreacha a chur isteach chuig an NEELB maidir le háiseanna pairceála.

Following a meeting on 26 February involving North Eastern Education and Library Board officials the school was advised that it should submit a minor works application form to the NEELB in respect of car-parking facilities. The Board will consider the request in due course, along with other competing priorities for minor works and the resources available.

### Integrated Schools

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the progress of her review of the viability criteria for integrated schools. (AQW 6447/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an Roinn Oideachais tiomanta do théarmaí an athbhreithnithe agus tá siad faoi mheasúnú agam le m'oifigigh. Mar a léiríodh sa fhreagra a thug mé ar AQO 1786/09 agus ar AQW 4148/09, a foilsíodh sa Tuairisc Oifigiúil ar 23 Eanáir agus 30 Eanáir 2009 faoi seach, tá sé ar intinn agam an t-athbhreithniú a chur i gcrích i mbliana.

I am considering with officials the terms of the review to which I have committed the Department of Education. As indicated in my response to AQO 1786/09 and AQW 4148/09 published in the Official Report on 23 January and 30 January 2009 respectively it is my intention to complete the review this year.

The necessity for an equality impact assessment will be considered once the terms of the review have been established.

### Integrated Schools

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education whether she has carried out an equality impact assessment for her review of the viability criteria for integrated schools, and if so to provide details. (AQW 6448/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an Roinn Oideachais tiomanta do théarmaí an athbhreithnithe agus tá siad faoi mheasúnú agam le m'oifigigh. Mar a léiríodh sa fhreagra a thug mé ar AQO 1786/09 agus ar AQW 4148/09, a foilsíodh sa Tuairisc Oifigiúil ar 23 Eanáir agus 30 Eanáir 2009 faoi seach, tá sé ar intinn agam an t-athbhreithniú a chur i gcrích i mbliana.

I am considering with officials the terms of the review to which I have committed the Department of Education. As indicated in my response to AQO 1786/09 and AQW 4148/09 published in the Official Report on 23 January and 30 January 2009 respectively it is my intention to complete the review this year.

The necessity for an equality impact assessment will be considered once the terms of the review have been established.

### Education and Library Boards

**Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Education (i) what funds are held by Education and Library Boards in contingency budgets; and (ii) what is the purpose of these contingency budgets. (AQW 6454/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Táispeántear thíos na cistí a choinníonn an cúig Bhórd Oideachais agus Leabharlainne i mbuiséid teagmhasacha don bhliain 2008/09:

Funds held in contingency budgets by the 5 Education and Library Boards for the 2008/09 year is as follows:

	LMS Contingency Provision	Curriculum Reserve Support Fund
BELB	£0	£0
NEELB	£580k	£ 0
SEELB	£807.8k	£100k
SELB	£834k	£158k
WELB	£339.1k	£19.2k

The funds set aside for contingency purposes are utilised during the year depending on need. Funds not utilised can be used to meet other pressures.

LMS Contingency Funds are used to correct any significant errors in the application of the formula budget, provide for emergency costs, deal with changes in the characteristics of the school including in-year growth in pupil numbers, and other circumstances which the funding authority judges exceptional.

Curriculum Reserve Support Funding can be made available to schools that claim support for funding against criteria set out by the relevant funding authority. This includes assistance to phase in a reduction in teaching staff, avoidance of a reduction in teaching staff caused by a short term dip in enrolments, additional support for schools under a rationalisation proposal/study or development proposal, a need to maintain essential curriculum provision, and the appointment or retention of teachers from a particular community background in the case of integrated schools.

### Fleming Fulton School

**Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Education what plans there are, when the Education and Skills Authority replaces the five Education and Library Boards, to consider granting Fleming Fulton School regional 'centre of excellence' status in light of its free provision of the LILAC project to all schools. (AQW 6475/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl stádas dá leithéid ar fáil faoi láthair agus níl sé beartaithe go mbeidh sé ar fáil do scoilanna speisialta.

There is no such status currently available or planned to be available to special schools.

The current policy review of special educational needs and inclusion within the Department has considered issues within the existing framework around unacceptable levels of bureaucracy attached to the statutory assessment process, the need for early identification, prompt interventions and capacity building in mainstream schools for teachers of children with special educational needs. The future role of special schools in the sharing of expertise between and across school sectors is being considered as part of the Review. It will be a matter for the Chief Executive of the Education Skills Authority if he wishes to consider how the work of the LILAC project might be taken forward in the future.

### Rathmore Primary School

**Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to provide a new school at Rathmore Primary School in Bangor. (AQW 6523/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tugadh le fios ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt nach bhfuil plean ar bith aige, faoi láthair, le scoil nua a thógáil ar son Rathmore Primary School.

The South Eastern Education & Library Board has advised that it has no plans, at this time, for a newbuild for Rathmore Primary School.

### Education Welfare Service

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 7060/08, to detail the number of pupils referred to the Education Welfare Service for truancy problems, broken down by (i) household; (ii) social class, or socio-economic status, in each of the last five years. (AQW 6587/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní bhailíonn an Roinn an t-eolas a iarradh.

The Department does not collect the requested information.

As stated in my previous answer, information about referrals by schools to the Education Welfare Service because of concerns about attendance, is collected from each of the Education and Library Boards on an annual basis. These statistics are not broken down in the manner which the member requests.

Referrals can be for a variety of reasons, which include truancy but not exclusively so.

Statistics on the number of referrals for non-attendance are published annually on the Department's website at [www.deni.gov.uk/index/21-pupils\\_parents-pg/21-pupils\\_parents-non-attendance\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/21-pupils_parents-pg/21-pupils_parents-non-attendance_pg.htm).

The table below shows the number of pupils referred for non-attendance by schools to the Education Welfare Service in each of the last five years.

School Year	Number of pupils
2003/04	8,041
2004/05	5,633
2005/06	4,467
2006/07	5,083
2007/08	4,275

### Donaghadee High School

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education if she will consult with the Minister for Regional Development about the road problems around Donaghadee High School, before any decision is made on the future of the site.

(AQW 6593/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá curtha in iúl ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go ndéanfaidh siad teagmháil go díreach leis an tSeirbhís Pleanála, sula ndéanfar aon obair ag Donaghadee High School lena dtuairimí a fháil maidir le haon úsáid mholta eile a mbainfear as Donaghadee High School. Ba chóir go sainaithneofaí aon fhadhbanna bóthair a d'fhéadfaí bheith ann tríd an teagmháil seo.

The South-Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that it will liaise directly with the Planning Service, prior to carrying out any work at Donaghadee High School in order to get their views of any proposed alternative use of Donaghadee High School. This liaison should identify any potential road problems.

### Primary Schools

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education what action she has taken to encourage more males to become teachers in primary education.

(AQW 6611/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá iarrtha ag mo Roinn, agus iarrfaidh mo Roinn, ar sholáthraithe cúrsaí in oideachas tosaigh múinteoirí (ITE) aird a tharraingt ar an éagothroime inscne sa ghairm bheatha, in earnáil na mbunscoileanna go háirithe.

My Department has encouraged, and will continue to encourage, all of the providers of initial teacher education (ITE) courses to draw attention to the gender imbalance in the profession, particularly in the primary sector.

As a result, the Higher Education Institutions are ensuring that males are well represented in publicity materials for their ITE courses and are targeting all-male schools and male groups in mixed schools for careers talks and presentations. They also meet regularly with careers teachers and senior staff to seek their help in encouraging males to apply for all ITE courses.

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.

### Primary Schools

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education how many primary schools have no male teachers in their staff.  
(AQW 6612/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an freagra le fáil sa tábla thíos.

The answer is given in the table below.

#### PRIMARY<sup>1</sup> SCHOOLS WITH NO MALE TEACHERS, 2007-2008

Number of primary schools with no male teachers	Total number of primary schools
255	884

<sup>1</sup> Includes the preparatory departments of grammar schools.

### Primary Schools

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of teachers in primary schools in the controlled and maintained sectors who are (i) male; and (ii) female.  
(AQW 6613/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an freagra le fáil sa tábla thíos.

The answer is given in the table below.

#### TEACHERS IN CONTROLLED AND CATHOLIC MAINTAINED PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND BY SEX, 2007-2008

Sector	Total number of teachers	Number (percentage) of male teachers	Number (percentage) of female teachers
Controlled <sup>1</sup> sector	4,124	522 (12.7%)	3,602 (87.3%)
Catholic maintained sector	3,775	713 (18.9%)	3,062 (81.1%)

<sup>1</sup> Includes the preparatory departments of controlled grammar schools.

### Secondary-School Pupils

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education (i) what percentage of secondary-school pupils have continued to study history up to GCSE level; and (ii) to detail the results, in each of the last five years.  
(AQW 6615/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhormáid a iarradh, ach sonraítear sa tábla thíos céatadán na ndaltaí i mBliain 12 a iontráladh ar stair GCSE agus a ngnóthachtálacha.

The information is not available in the format requested, however the table below details the percentage of year 12 pupils entered for GCSE history and their achievements.

Year	(i) Percentage of year 12 pupils entered for GCSE history	(ii) Percentage of entries in history achieving grades *A- C	(ii) Percentage of entries in history achieving grades *A- G
2007/08	31	78	98
2006/07	32	78	98
2005/06	34	78	98
2004/05	33	78	98
2003/04	34	76	98

Source: Forvus

### Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Education how much has been spent on each of the available options for Transfer (i) 2010; and (ii) 2011. (AQW 6661/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Beidh costais ar an scála céanna i gceist leis na socruithe d'Aistriú 2010, a bhí bunaithe ar an Treoir a foilsíodh ar 2 Feabhra 2009, agus a bhí na costais a tabhaíodh sna blianta roimhe, agus is é an difear is mó eatarthu ná an easpa caiteachais ar riaradh teiste lárchomhordaithe a d'éascaigh 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.

The cost of work carried out by CCEA on a test commissioned as a contingency is around £100,000. In the absence of Executive agreement on regulations for post-primary Transfer 2010, around £9,000 has been spent on the printing and distribution of guidance material for schools and parents.

Excluding the administration of a 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.

Arrangements for Transfer 2011 have yet to be determined.

### Post-Primary Transfer

**Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Education what role InCAS (Interactive Computerised Assessment System) will play in assisting parents and schools in post-primary transfer. (AQW 6662/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní bhaineann measúnuithe InCAS le haistriú daltaí ón bhunscoil chuig an iar-bhunscoil ar chor ar bith. Ceapadh mar mheasúnuithe diagnóiseacha iad le cuidiú a thabhairt do mhúinteoirí an teagasc a phleanáil le freastal ar riachtanais aitheanta na ndaltaí.

InCAS assessments are not in any way related to the transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary school. They are designed as diagnostic assessments to help teachers plan their teaching to meet the identified needs of pupils.

### School Building Projects

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Education to how many school building projects are underway in the Upper Bann constituency. (AQW 6679/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá seacht mórthionscadal tógála i dtoghcheantar na Banna Uachtaraí faoi láthair. Tá sé thionscadal acu ag céimeanna éagsúla pleanála agus tá ceann amháin acu á thógáil faoi láthair.

There are currently seven major building projects in the Upper Bann constituency. Six are at various stages of planning and one is currently under construction.

### St Malachy's Primary School

**Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to provide a new school building for St Malachy's Primary School, Bangor. (AQW 6684/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is ceist í pleanáil eastát na scoileanna faoi chothabháil a bhaineann le Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil (CCMS) sa chéad dul síos.

The planning of the maintained schools estate is a matter for the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) in the first instance. A potential capital major works scheme for St Malachy's Primary School is one of a number of schemes that CCMS has indicated it intends to pursue with the Department in the next number of months. The possibility of a new school building for St Malachy's is therefore at a very early stage of consideration.

### Rebuilding of Schools

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education how many schools have been (a) built (b) closed; and (c) rebuilt, in the last 10 years. (AQW 6702/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Le deich mbliana anuas, (a) tógadh 20 scoil nua, (b) druideadh 70 scoil, agus (c) aththógadh 98 scoil. Is scoileanna iad na scoileanna nua thógtha a osclaíodh leis an éileamh ar áiteanna i gceantar a fhreastal nó le cónascadh dhá scoil nó níos mó a éascú.

In the last 10 years there have been (a) 20 new schools built (b) 70 schools closed, and (c) 98 schools rebuilt. The new schools built are schools that were opened to meet demand for places in an area or to facilitate the amalgamation of two or more schools.

### Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team

**Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Education (i) is there a register of interests for the staff of the Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team; and (ii) is it included on the ESAIT website and if not, if a copy could be placed in the Assembly library. (AQW 6705/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá foireann ón Roinn Oideachais agus foireann ar iasacht ón cúig Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna), ó CCMS agus ó CCEA ar Fhoireann Forfheidmithe an ESA. Bíonn an fhoireann seo faoi réir chód iompraíochta a n-eagraíochtaí féin, ó thaobh dearbhaithe leasa de.

The ESA Implementation Team comprises staff from the Department of Education and staff seconded from the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs), CCMS and CCEA. These staff are subject to the code of conduct of their respective organisation with regard to declaration of interests.

There is no separate register of interests for the ESA Implementation Team. The Chief Executive Designate of ESA, Gavin Boyd, completes an annual declaration which is included in the DE annual accounts. The Education and Library Boards, CCEA and CCMS all maintain a register of interests which are available to the public by written request.

### Strandtown Primary School

**Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Education when the start date is for the rebuild of the Strandtown Primary School as part of the Phase 2 of the Belfast Education and Library Board strategic partnership arrangement capital build programme. (AQW 6706/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá mo Roinn ag déanamh breithnithe ar an bhreithmheas leasaithe eacnamaíochta don scéim mhóroibreacha caipitil ag Strandtown Primary School agus tá sí i mbun oibre le cuidiú le Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste chun teacht ar réiteach, a sholáthróidh an luach ar airgead is fearr is féidir. Ní féidir, mar sin de, dáta deifnídeach tosaigh a thabhairt ag an am seo.

My Department is currently considering the revised economic appraisal for the major capital works scheme for Strandtown Primary School and is working to assist the Belfast Education and Library Board in arriving at an outcome, which will be the best value for money solution possible. It is, therefore, not possible to offer a definitive start date at this time.

### Glenwood Primary School

**Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Education when the start date is for the rebuild of the Glenwood Primary School as part of the Phase 2 of the Belfast Education and Library Board strategic partnership arrangement capital build programme. (AQW 6707/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá mo Roinn ag déanamh breithnithe ar an bhreithmheas leasaithe eacnamaíochta don scéim mhóroibreacha caipitil ag Glenwood Primary School agus tá sí i mbun oibre le cuidiú le Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste chun teacht ar réiteach, a sholáthróidh an luach ar airgead is fearr is féidir. Ní féidir, mar sin de, dáta deifnídeach tosaigh a thabhairt ag an am seo.

My Department is currently considering the revised economic appraisal for the major capital works scheme for Glenwood Primary School and is working to assist the Belfast Education and Library Board in arriving at an outcome, which will be the best value for money solution possible. It is, therefore, not possible to offer a definitive start date at this time.

### Integrated Schools

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education how the failure to follow best employment practice affects the charitable status of an integrated school. (AQW 6708/09)

**The Minister of Education:** I ndiaidh don Roinn Oideachais dul i gcomhairle leis an Roinn Forbartha Sóisialta, cuireadh in iúl dom, as siocair gur ceist bainistíochta seachas ceist carthanachta í nach bhfuil dea-chleachtais fostaíochta i bhfeidhm i scoil imeasctha faoi chothabháil stáit, ní dhóchúil go mbeadh aon tionchar aige seo ar stádas carthanachta na scoile.

After consultation with the Department of Social Development, I am advised that as the failure of best employment practices within a grant maintained integrated school is a management and not a charity matter, this would not be likely to have any impact on the school's charitable status.

### Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education what the consequences are for a grant maintained integrated college if it fails to follow the code for practice that it signed with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education. (AQW 6709/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní éilíonn an Roinn Oideachais ar scoileanna imeasctha glacadh le Ráiteas Prionsabal an NICIE ná é a shíniú. Is ceist í a shocraíonn na scoileanna féin cé acu atá siad ag iarraidh glacadh leis.

The Department of Education does not require an integrated school to sign up to the NICIE Statement of Principles. It is a matter for individual schools to decide if they wish to do so.

### Integrated Schools

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education if employees of integrated schools are entitled to parity of esteem with colleagues in (i) the Education and Library Board; (ii) Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; and (iii) Irish speaking sectors of education who are in similar jobs. (AQW 6710/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is mór agam an obair a dhéanann fostaithe i ngach scoil, is cuma cén earnáil ina bhfuil siad. Bíonn ról rithábachtach acu in oideachas na ndaoine óga inár scoileanna.

I appreciate and value the work of employees in all schools, irrespective of sector. They play a vital role in the education of the young people in our schools.

Grant-maintained integrated schools are employers in their own right and it is wholly the responsibility of individual Boards of Governors to appoint all staff. It is fair to say, however, that grant-maintained integrated schools adopt the principle of parity with employees of other sectors in relation to the pay and terms and conditions of employment of their staff.

### Board of Governors

**Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Education what consequences Board of Governors face if they are in breach of the Nolan Principles. (AQW 6711/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Ní riachtanais ar leith iad The Nolan Principles a bhaineann le ceapachán, le hainmniúchán nó le toghchán ball de Bhord Gobhanóirí na scoile. Bíonn socrúithe eile i gceist le leasa bainistíochta na scoileanna deontaschúnta a chosaint.

The Nolan Principles are not a specific requirement associated with the appointment, nomination or election of the members of a school Board of Governors. Alternative arrangements apply to safeguard the management interests of grant-aided schools.

Before taking up office, a school governor must sign a declaration of acceptance of membership which requires him/her to carry out their duties in accordance with the scheme of management approved by the Department for the school.

This scheme includes provisions which disqualify governors from service and which are designed to protect the school against any conflict of interest on the part of the school's governors. Also, systems of audit and accountability exist to safeguard the proper use and management of funds and procurement procedures.

### Youth Workers

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 6288/09, how many (i) youth clubs; (ii) youth workers; (iii) detached youth workers; and (iv) young people are the Belfast Education and Library Board area, broken down by (a) north; (b) south; (c) east; and (d) west Belfast. (AQW 6730/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an t-eolas seo a leanas don bhliain 2008/09 curtha ar fáil ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste.

The Chief Executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board has provided the following information for 2008/09.

Pursuant to the answer given to AQW 6288/09, information has also been included on the financial support provided by the BELB from DE funding for youth work and the number of small voluntary groups (SVG) registered with the BELB by constituency area.

		South	East	North	West
<b>Estimated financial support for youth work (£) (i)</b>		633,204	462,937	669,987	1,188,802
<b>Number of youth clubs/ units/ SVG (ii)</b>	Full time units	4	3	6	11
	Part time units	8	5	4	13
	SVG	44	61	54	36
<b>Number of youth workers (iii)</b>	Full time workers	5	5	8	15
	Part time workers	45	28	41	98
<b>Number of full time detached youth workers (iv)</b>		2	0	2	8
<b>Number of young people enrolled/ registered in youth clubs/units/SVGs</b>		4,916	7,213	6,578	9,840

#### Notes

- (i) This relates to DE funding for the youth service, including intervention work and community relations programmes.
- (ii) This relates to youth clubs/ units/ small voluntary groups registered with the Boards and is the latest information available. Not all registered clubs/ units receive funding through the Board. Small voluntary groups will include uniformed, and small community and church based youth groups.
- (iii) This relates to full-time and part-time youth workers funded by the Belfast Education and Library Board from the DE youth and community relations budget.
- (iv) This relates to detached youth workers funded by the Belfast Education and Library Board from the DE youth and community relations budget. There are no part-time detached youth workers

### Initial Teacher Education Provision

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Education, given the proposed merger of Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College, what assessment she has made of the effect of this merger on the allocation of initial teacher education places. (AQW 6767/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is soláthar ar leith é an soláthar a chuireann an dá institiúid ar fáil maidir le hOideachas Tosaigh do Mhúinteoirí (ITE).

The nature of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision at the two institutions is distinct.

The School of Education at Queen's University Belfast provides for students who, following completion of an undergraduate course, wish to enter ITE through the one-year Post-Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course, whilst Stranmillis University College largely provides for students who wish to enter ITE straight from school through the four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) course.

As part of the annual process of determining intakes, I carefully consider the needs of these students, the schools' sector and of the ITE providers in terms of ensuring a viable and vibrant ITE sector that meets the needs of our pluralist education system, and will continue to do so in the event of a merger between Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College.

### Initial Teacher Education Provision

**Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Education to confirm if there will be a reduction in the number of initial teacher education places allocated to Queen's University, Belfast, following the merger with Stranmillis University College. (AQW 6768/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Is soláthar ar leith é an soláthar a chuireann an dá institiúid ar fáil maidir le hOideachas Tosaigh do Mhúinteoirí (ITE).

The nature of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision at the two institutions is distinct.

The School of Education at Queen's University Belfast provides for students who, following completion of an undergraduate course, wish to enter ITE through the one-year Post-Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course, whilst Stranmillis University College largely provides for students who wish to enter ITE straight from school through the four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) course.

As part of the annual process of determining intakes, I carefully consider the needs of these students, the schools' sector and of the ITE providers in terms of ensuring a viable and vibrant ITE sector that meets the needs of our pluralist education system, and will continue to do so in the event of a merger between Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College.

### School Meals

**Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Education if she will ensure that Roma children receiving free school meals will continue to receive them after April. (AQW 6812/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Tá an Roinn ag déanamh breithnithe ar na critéir cáilitheachta do bhéilí saora scoile a leathnú faoi láthair le go n-áireofar na daltaí sin a gcreideann an scoil gur 'páistí le riachtanais' iad agus tá an Roinn i mbun phlé leis an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí ó thaobh na mionshocruithe riaracháin de.

The Department is presently considering extending the eligibility criteria for free school meals to include those pupils a school believes to be "children in need" and is in discussions with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding the detailed administrative arrangements for this.

It is likely that a number of the Roma children currently enrolled at schools here will come within this definition and would therefore be entitled to free school meals.

### Children in Need

**Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Education to detail her Department's guidance in relation to those children categorised as 'children in need'. (AQW 6813/09)

**The Minister of Education:** Baineann seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta úsáid as an chatagóiriú 'Páistí le riachtanais' agus aithnítear go bhfuil páistí agus daoine óga ann a bhfuil tacaíocht nó seirbhísí de dhíth orthu de bhreis ar na príomhsheirbhísí a sholáthraítear don phobal i gcoitinne.

The categorisation of 'children in need' is used by health and social services and recognises that there are children and young people who require support or services in addition to those mainstream services provided to the entire population.

While the categorisation of ‘children in need’ is not used within the education sector, it is recognised that many children and young people do experience barriers to learning and require additional or specialist support to sustain their engagement with the learning process. A range of advice and guidance documents have been issued to schools on issues such as promoting positive behaviour and tackling bullying and these have included advice on supporting vulnerable children and young people.

Further as vulnerable pupils with new support requirements are identified appropriate action is taken, such as that outlined in the response to AQW 6812/2009.

## DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

### Queen’s University

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning the religious breakdown of students attending Queen’s University, Belfast. (AQW 6389/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** Information on religion is only collected for Northern Ireland (NI) domiciled students studying at NI institutions.

On that basis, the number of NI domiciled students enrolled in courses at Queen’s University, Belfast, broken down by religious background in 2007/08 academic year is detailed in the table below:

Religion	Number
Protestant	6,735
Catholic	8,245
Other	1,105
Not Known/available	3,540
Total	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.

### Apprentices

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to promote women in apprenticeships. (AQW 6390/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Historically the male to female ratio for apprenticeships has typically been 70:30. The first year review of Training for Success in 2008, resulted in a revised flagship provision for apprentices entitled ApprenticeshipsNI. Improvements included the introduction of an all age programme, coupled with capacity for those on reduced hour employment contracts of 21 hours per week. Collectively these changes have had a positive impact with 46% of Level 2 and Level 3 apprentices at 4 March 2009 being female. This compares favourably to 32% on the Jobskills Modern Apprenticeships at 31st August 2007.

The Department will continue through its future marketing campaign and work with Sector Skills Councils to further promote the ApprenticeshipsNI programme and its availability to all.

### Apprentices

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he is considering how the public sector can be used to assist the retention of apprentices during the economic downturn. (AQW 6392/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** Although the Department has made the ApprenticeshipsNI provision open to a wide range of participants, employees within the Public Sector and Local Authorities have historically been excluded in order to focus the funding available on these developments in the private sector. However, the Department is presently engaged with DFP's Central Personnel Group (CPG) and Government Skills, the Sector Skills Council for the public sector, to explore apprenticeship programmes in the NI Civil Service. Consideration will also be given to the broader public sector including local authorities and health trusts.

### Southern Regional College

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students in the Southern Regional College who are engaged on courses above level 3. (AQW 6433/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In the 2007/08 Academic year, the latest year for which validated data is available, there were 1,701 student enrolments on courses above Level 3 at the Southern Regional College.

**Source:** Further Education Statistical Record.

### Southern Regional College

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much income the Southern Regional College and its constituent colleges made from non-governmental sources, in the past three years. (AQW 6434/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Southern Regional College was formed on 1 August 2007 following the amalgamation of Upper Bann Institute, Newry and Kilkeel Institute and Armagh College. The total income received by the Southern Regional College, and its constituent colleges, from non-governmental sources for the three years from 2005/06 to 2007/08 was £13,307,000.

### Southern Regional College

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many full cost recovery courses are operating currently in the Southern Regional College. (AQW 6436/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In the 2007/08 Academic year, the latest year for which validated data is available, there were 500 full cost recovery courses operating at the Southern Regional College.

**Source:** Further Education Statistical Record

### South Eastern Regional College

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students in the South Eastern Regional College who are engaged on courses above level 3. (AQW 6437/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In the 2007/08 Academic year (latest available data), there were 1,257 student enrolments on courses above Level 3 at the South Eastern Regional College.

**Source:** Further Education Statistical Record

### South Eastern Regional College

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many Governors of the former constituent colleges of the Southern Regional College are serving on the Board of the Southern Regional College. (AQW 6438/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** There are presently seventeen persons serving on the Governing Body of Southern Regional College. Of these seventeen persons, four have previously served as a member of the governing body of one of the constituent colleges which comprise Southern Regional College.

### South Eastern Regional College

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much income the South Eastern Regional College and its constituent colleges made from non-governmental sources in the last three years. (AQW 6439/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The South Eastern Regional College was formed on 1 August 2007 following the amalgamation of the North Down and Ards Institute, Lisburn Institute and East Down Institute. Audited accounts are not yet available for 2007/08 which was the first year of the merged college. In the three previous years, from 2004/05 to 2006/07, the constituent colleges received total non-governmental income of £13,470,000.

### South Eastern Regional College

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many full cost recovery courses are operating currently in the South Eastern Regional College. (AQW 6441/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In the 2007/08 Academic year, the latest year for which validated data is available, there were 244 full cost recovery courses operating at the South Eastern Regional College.

**Source:** Further Education Statistical Record

### Northern Regional College

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students in the Northern Regional College who are engaged on courses above level 3. (AQW 6442/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In the 2007/08 Academic year, the latest year for which validated data is available, there were 1,037 student enrolments on courses above Level 3 at the Northern Regional College.

**Source:** Further Education Statistical Record

### Northern Regional College

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many full cost recovery courses are currently operating in the Northern Regional College. (AQW 6443/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** In the 2007/08 Academic year, the latest year for which validated data is available, there were 562 full cost recovery courses operating at the Northern Regional College.

**Source:** Further Education Statistical Record

### Northern Regional College

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much income the Northern Regional College and its constituent colleges made from non-governmental sources, in the past three years. (AQW 6444/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The Northern Regional College was formed on 1 August 2007 following the amalgamation of North East Institute, East Antrim Institute and Causeway Institute. The total income received by the Northern Regional College, and its constituent colleges, from non-governmental sources for the three years from 2005/06 to 2007/08 was £10,672,000.

### Northern Regional College

**Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many Governors of the former constituent colleges of the Northern Regional College are still serving on the board of the Northern Regional College. (AQW 6449/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** There are presently fourteen persons serving on the Governing Body of Northern Regional College. Of these fourteen persons, five have previously served as a member of the governing body of one of the constituent colleges which comprise Northern Regional College.

### South Eastern Regional College

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many Governors of the colleges that formerly constituted the South Eastern Regional College are still serving on the board of the South Eastern Regional College. (AQW 6451/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** There are presently fourteen people serving on the Governing Body of South Eastern Regional College. Of these, three have previously served as a member of the governing body of one of the constituent colleges which comprise South Eastern Regional College.

### University Courses

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people over the age of 40 have enrolled for University courses in each of the last five years. (AQW 6531/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** The number of student enrolments over the age of 40 enrolled on Higher Education courses at NI Higher Education Institutions in each of the last five years is detailed in the table below:

Year	Enrolments
2003/04	5,780
2004/05	6,185
2005/06	6,210
2006/07	5,300
2007/08	5,115

**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.

### St Mary's College

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions has he had with the Minister for Education on future student numbers for St Mary's College. (AQW 6651/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I have not had any recent discussions with the Minister of Education on future student numbers for St Mary's University College. I have, however, written to her twice since last summer on a number of issues in relation to teacher education, including student numbers for all of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

### Queens University and Stranmillis College Merger

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the view from Queens University and Stranmillis College, that their proposed merger is a fait accompli. (AQW 6653/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I do not regard the merger as a fait accompli. As I have previously stated, the merger between Queen's University Belfast and Stranmillis requires a fully costed economic appraisal to be approved by both my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel. Subject to approval of the appraisal, my Department will carry out a public consultation exercise prior to any

decision being taken on the merger and to any enabling legislation being drafted. The Departmental Committee and the Assembly will be involved fully in any approval process. Until such time as this due process is finalised the proposed merger will not be completed.

### North West Regional College

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he is aware of a resolution passed on 20 February 2009 by members of the University and College Union at the North West Regional College expressing no confidence in the institution's Director and calling for the governing body to take direct control of the running of the college. (AQW 6727/09)

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I have noted the resolution passed on 20 February 2009 by members of the University and College Union at the North West Regional College expressing no confidence in the Institution's Director and calling for the governing body to take direct control of the running of the college. This is not, at least initially, a matter for my Department. The Director is an employee of the Institution, and the Governing Body, as the employer, has responsibility for any matter relating to discharge of his duties.

## DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

### All-Island Public Procurement by InterTrade Ireland

**Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to the commissioning of a report on All-Island Public Procurement by InterTrade Ireland, to give his assessment of the economic gains from all-island procurement. (AQO 2392/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster):** The draft report commissioned by InterTradeIreland, entitled 'All Island Public Procurement: A Competitiveness Study' is unlikely to be published until April 2009. DETI cannot therefore respond to the findings and recommendations at this stage.

The objectives for this study were to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of the public procurement market and to make recommendations for mutually beneficial co-operative action.

DETI will look forward to receiving the final report in due course.

In terms of the importance of public procurement in relation to economic recovery, Minister Dodds in his statement made to the Assembly on 23 March, 2009, pointed out that significant capital investment has been made for example, in relation to the construction industry. During this financial year alone, it is expected that Government capital investment will be in the order of £1.5 Billion, compared with £676 Million five years ago. The devolved administration recognises the importance of capital investment in infrastructure and working with the construction industry to deliver.

Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel has, on behalf of Northern Ireland Departments, provided construction industry representatives at the Procurement Task Group of the Construction Industry Forum with a comprehensive list of the projects that are to be advertised or are already at various stages of the procurement process. This list includes some 60 projects with an aggregated value in excess of £400 Million.

Public sector investment is set to continue to increase over the remaining years of the Investment Strategy. The gross capital investment planned for the next two financial years is intended to be more than £3 Billion.

### Electricity Prices

**Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the rise in electricity prices of 52% since September 2008; and, following the reduction in oil prices, when she expects electricity prices to fall to their previous level. (AQW 6284/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** My Department has no statutory powers to set or to direct energy companies in setting tariffs. The Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) has a statutory obligation to regulate and closely monitor the tariff setting process for NIE Energy (NIEE) and other regulated energy providers, and 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.

In Spring 2008, NIEE took the 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 on their part in order to protect consumers over the winter period.

However although wholesale energy costs have fallen considerably since summer 2008, the NIEE strategy has meant that the company is not currently in a position 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.

NIAUR is expected to publish its detailed plans and timetable on the forthcoming electricity contract year shortly, and it is their expectation that, should wholesale fuel costs continue to stay low or fall further, that this will be translated into lower electricity bills during 2009. The next scheduled review of prices is October 2009.

### Invest NI

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the expenditure by Invest NI in the (i) Dungannon; (ii) Cookstown; (iii) Omagh; (iv) Magherafelt District Council areas, in the financial years (a) 2006/07; (b) 2007/08; (c) 2008 to date, and the number of jobs it created. (AQW 6337/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI does not budget for, allocate or record expenditure per District Council Area.

However, the table below provides information on the amount of assistance offered by Invest NI within the four District Council Areas during the time period requested. This represents the value of support which is expected to be paid towards business-related investment during the life-time of assisted projects. Total assistance includes that relating to business innovation activities, which is not specifically employment related. The latter is highlighted within the table.

The table also includes assistance offered through the Northern Ireland Start a Business Programme, which is delivered in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland. It should be noted that job promotion figures with regard to locally-owned projects is not available for 2006-07.

		Cookstown	Dungannon	Magherafelt	Omagh
2006/07	<b>Invest NI Direct Support</b>				
	Total Assistance Offered	1,436,738	2,452,965	931,850	679,819
	Employment Related Assistance Offered	662,886	1,245,845	403,420	308,133
	Number of Jobs Promoted	*	*	*	*
	Number of Jobs Safeguarded	*	*	*	*
	<b>Invest NI Indirect Support</b>				
	SABp Assistance Offered	32,400	44,600	37,200	43,000
	SABp Jobs Promoted	120	157	133	156

		Cookstown	Dungannon	Magherafelt	Omagh
2007/08	<b>Invest NI Direct Support</b>				
	Total Assistance Offered	2,531,681	8,890,605	2,370,630	3,675,740
	Employment Related Assistance Offered	1,003,330	6,778,526	1,627,752	2,477,408
	Number of Jobs Promoted	140	245	116	137
	Number of Jobs Safeguarded	4	0	80	0
	<b>Invest NI Indirect Support</b>				
	SABp Assistance Offered	38,800	46,200	47,600	53,400
	SABp Jobs Promoted	138	168	163	195
2008/09 (Apr 08 - Feb 09) - Provisional	<b>Invest NI Direct Support</b>				
	Total Assistance Offered	2,345,273	5,537,671	1,566,701	1,091,431
	Employment Related Assistance Offered	961,367	2,044,471	753,090	289,005
	Number of Jobs Promoted	101	248	88	38
	Number of Jobs Safeguarded	103	293	10	0
	<b>Invest NI Indirect Support</b>				
	SABp Assistance Offered	15,200	24,000	11,400	28,800
	SABp Jobs Promoted	86	126	81	148

**Note:** \*Job promotion data for locally-owned clients was not available for 2006/07

Figures for 2008/09 (Apr 08 - Feb 09) are provisional and may be subject to amendment.

Employment related assistance is contained within total assistance

## Invest NI

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the total amount of money that has been paid in bonuses to Invest NI staff; and (ii) how the bonuses were distributed across each staffing grade, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6346/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Three types of bonus are payable in Invest NI: -

- The remuneration package for the Chief Executive has a bonus element;
- bonuses are paid to Managing Directors (equivalent to NICS Grade 3) and Directors (equivalent to Grade 5) on the same basis as applies to the Senior Civil Service. These bonuses are based on the recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Body and form part of the annual pay settlement.
- staff up to and including a level equivalent to Grade 6 level in Invest NI are eligible for bonuses under the Special Bonus Scheme to reward exceptional performance. This scheme is applied on the same basis as the NICS scheme of the same name.

All bonuses are non-consolidated and non-pensionable.

Amounts paid in bonuses, together with the grade distribution of awards, are set out in the tables below.

### SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

Year	Total Bonuses £	Grade 5	Grade 3	Chief Executive
05 - 06	77817	9	3	1
06 - 07	99398	10	4	1
07 - 08	111866	9	4	1

The application of SCS pay policy has meant that the bonus (as distinct from pensionable pay) element increased from 2.3% of the SCS paybill in 2002 to 8.6% in 2008.

**OTHER STAFF**

Year	Total Bonuses £		AO	EO II	EO I	SO	DP	G7	G6
05 - 06	7300			4	1	1	8	1	1
06 - 07	1000						1		
07 - 08	16100		4	6	2	6	7	4	

**Energy Infrastructure**

**Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what work her Department has undertaken in preparation for expanding the energy infrastructure. (AQW 6362/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** DETI is presently developing a new Strategic Energy Framework for Northern Ireland. The overall emphasis will be a shift towards a cleaner and more efficient energy mix, including greater use of renewable energy sources, and extending the benefits of natural gas.

In relation to energy infrastructure, DETI is involved in plans to strengthen the electricity grid to support an increase in the amount of electricity generated from sustainable sources. This follows the All-island Grid Study report, published in 2008, which noted that much higher levels of electricity could be generated from plentiful renewable sources.

In addition, Northern Ireland is working with Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland on the Isles Tripartite off-shore grid project, to explore the potential for an offshore electricity grid to capture marine renewables, namely, wind, wave and tidal.

The Department also plans to consider the technical feasibility and economics of taking natural gas to towns in the West and North-West of Northern Ireland, and is in the final stages of commissioning a study. The Department is also considering the merits of a proposal to take natural gas to towns in the Downpatrick economic corridor in East Down.

In addition DETI has commissioned a study to investigate the geology in the East Antrim area, including the off-shore area, to determine its suitability for underground energy storage. The development of large-scale energy storage facilities would help to improve Northern Ireland's security of energy supply.

In preparation for the development of offshore wind and marine renewables, in particular tidal stream, DETI is undertaking a Strategic Environmental Assessment to identify the potential effects such developments may have on the environment. This work will enable my Department, in conjunction with The Crown Estate as owners of the seabed, to launch a competitive call for development projects later in 2010.

**Laying Power Cables**

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what the comparative costs per mile are for laying (i) underground; and (ii) overhead power cables. (AQW 6478/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The costs of installing transmission grid cables are project specific and are significantly influenced by the size of the cable and the nature of the route. Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) recently published a report by Parsons Brinckerhoff that compared the cost of the 400kV transmission cable options for the planned Cavan - Tyrone circuit. This report indicates that the construction of a 400kV overhead line could cost approximately £760,000 per mile, compared to an estimated cost of £5.611 million per mile for an underground line.

NIE estimates that the cost of constructing an overhead 33kV distribution grid line could range from £55,000 to £113,000 per mile depending on the type of construction required. For an underground line the estimated cost could be about £255,000 per mile. This is based on a typical single circuit route laid on roadway in an urban area.

The company estimates that the cost of constructing an overhead 11kV distribution grid line could be approximately £30,300 per mile, while the cost of laying the line underground could be £130,000 per mile. This is based on a typical route comprising footpaths and roads.

## Small Businesses

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what help she is giving to small businesses. (AQW 6487/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI offers a wide range of support to encourage the growth and development of the small business sector. It 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.

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](http://www.investni.com/bds_brochure_march_06.pdf)

Invest NI has recently introduced new schemes focused on supporting small business growth, including the Growth Accelerator Programme, that assists Small and Medium-sized Enterprises to achieve faster growth in export markets.

In addition, 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.

## Invest NI

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail Invest Northern Ireland's North West Action Plan, including identifying target areas and planned deliverables. (AQW 6534/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI continues to be committed to working in partnership with local stakeholders in the North West, including Councils and is actively investing in relevant projects in the Region in line with their current Corporate Plan.

However, there is currently no formal North West Action Plan (NWAP). The economic environment has changed significantly since NWAP Phase I and Phase II (2003 – 2008). The relevance, content and extent of any future plan must to be considered in the context of a number of factors including:

- The desire of the original Council partners (Londonderry, Strabane, Coleraine, Limavady and Magherafelt) to move away from this traditional grouping and begin to develop new partnerships within the context of the new RPA Council clusters.
- The significant European Funding now available via the Interreg, Rural Development and DETI Competitiveness and Employment Programmes.
- The role of the North West Gateway Initiative in providing a framework for future investment in the wider North West Region

Invest NI will continue to engage with Councils in the North West to explore the most appropriate mechanism for delivery of relevant joint projects and initiatives.

## Invest NI

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to the Invest NI North West Action Plan, (i) to outline the targets set; and (ii) to provide Invest NI's assessment of progress, in each of the past 3 years. (AQW 6535/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI's North West Action Plan phase II covers a proportion of the past three years, specifically the period 1st April 2006 to 31st March 2008. It concentrated on consolidating the gains made in the first action plan as well as a series of specific joint initiatives with the NW Councils. These initiatives were designed to address capability weaknesses within SME's throughout the NW region focusing on three main themes Innovation, Internationalisation and Business Development.

The Councils awarded contracts for delivery of the programmes to consultants following appropriate tendering exercises, the key targets set were:

### **Innovation**

- Delivery of 5 Regional Seminars

### **Internationalisation**

- 100 Businesses profiled
- 47 Businesses to participate in workshop/mentoring activities
- 15 Export Plans Developed

### **Business Development**

- 250 Businesses profiled
- 80 Business Audits
- 320 Mentoring Sessions
- 30 Businesses Referred to Invest NI

Invest NI have confirmed that these targets have been largely met or exceeded. There has been no formal North West Action Plan in operation since March 2008.

## Invest NI

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what funding opportunities are available under Invest Northern Ireland's North West Action Plan. (AQW 6536/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI do not currently have a formal North West Action Plan. However, the agency continues to engage with Councils in the Region to explore the most appropriate mechanism for delivery of relevant joint projects and initiatives.

Invest NI funding for good, eligible projects is not diminished by the absence of a North West Action Plan. Invest NI is keen to encourage project promoters to present proposals and will assess any project in line with standard appraisal and approval procedures. Invest NI personnel both locally and from across the organisation engage actively with local stakeholders and businesses to deliver relevant investment and services to the North West in line with Invest NI's Corporate Plan 2008-2011.

## Project Kelvin

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the technical basis by which the solution proposed by Hibernia Atlantic for Project Kelvin will guarantee 99.999% availability between the three mandatory locations and New York. (AQW 6601/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Hibernia Atlantic is contracted to deliver 99.999% availability at all 13 mandatory locations specified in the Project Kelvin contract.

Hibernia Atlantic is not due to complete the commissioning of the terrestrial infrastructure until October 2009 and the technical design is ongoing. The network will be fully tested for compliance with the contracts performance standards when both the terrestrial and submarine elements have been completed. The Department will continue the monitoring and testing of the network until the contract ends in December 2018.

### Project Kelvin

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) when the re-design of the technical solution proposed by Hibernia Atlantic for Project Kelvin will be completed; and (ii) to detail the independent technical advice that will be sought to assess compliance with the Invitation to Tender requirements.

(AQW 6603/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Hibernia Atlantic is due to complete the overall network design and commissioning of the terrestrial infrastructure associated with Project Kelvin by October 2009. The telehouse forms part of this infrastructure and Hibernia Atlantic has indicated its intention to submit a request to seek a variation to the existing contract to facilitate a relocation of the telehouse from Coleraine to the city of Londonderry. This will involve a redesign of the telehouse and it is likely to be several weeks before the revised proposal is submitted by Hibernia Atlantic to DETI and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR).

Central Procurement Directorate, on behalf of the Department, will shortly be running a full EU procurement competition for the appointment of technical consultants to advise the Department during both the construction phase and the first two years of the operational phase of this contract. The consultants will assist the Departments in assessing compliance with the performance and other technical aspects of the Kelvin contract. The new consultants are expected to be appointed before the end of May 2009.

### Project Kelvin

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to Project Kelvin, if she will request that Hibernia Atlantic demonstrate in a technical proof, how it will achieve 99.999 percent availability in each of the mandatory locations.

(AQW 6719/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Hibernia Atlantic is contracted to deliver 99.999% availability at all 13 mandatory locations specified in the Project Kelvin contract.

Work on the technical design by Hibernia Atlantic is ongoing and not due to be completed before the commissioning of the terrestrial infrastructure in October 2009. There is no value in requesting a technical proof when the network design has not been completed.

The network will be fully tested for compliance with the contracts performance standards when both the terrestrial and submarine elements have been completed. The Department will continue the monitoring and testing of the network until the contract ends in December 2018.

### Visteon's Manufacturing Plant

**Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) what financial assistance has been provided by Invest NI to Visteon's manufacturing plant in Belfast; (ii) what safeguards are in place to protect any assistance.

(AQW 6867/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI provided Visteon UK with financial assistance in 2003 for the development of a fuel rail. The offer totalled £109,305 of which £97,210 was paid.

The Letter of Offer contained clauses to protect Invest NI's investment and, where appropriate, claw back of monies paid will be invoked.

### Visteon's Manufacturing Plant

**Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what report she was provided to her, by Invest NI in January 2009, about the viability assessment initiated by Visteon.

(AQW 6868/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** Invest NI has kept me informed of a number of companies facing difficulties, on an ongoing basis, including Visteon.

The viability of Visteon Belfast has been an issue for a number of years with management trying to address the issue primarily through managing costs. At a meeting in February 2009 the Managing Director of Visteon

UK Ltd stated that he was tasked to come up with a plan by 30 March 2009 to establish financial break even over the next twelve months. Similar discussions had taken place between Invest NI and Visteon in 2006.

Invest NI had discussions with local management around possible areas of assistance in March 2009 but no proposals were forthcoming. A further meeting was organised for 8 April 2009.

I am assured that Invest NI were exploring how Visteon could be encouraged to continue to operate in Belfast and would have reported to me on the outcome of such discussions. Unfortunately, the decision to place Visteon UK in administration was taken without any reference to Invest NI or DETI.

### **Visteon's Manufacturing Plant**

**Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what advice she was given by her officials on the future of Visteon operations in Belfast following meetings between Invest NI and the company in February and March 2009. (AQW 6869/09)

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** No decision on the future of the UK manufacturing operations had been made when Invest NI officials met with Visteon management in February and March 2009. These meetings were a continuation of meetings that had taken place for a number of years. Invest NI continued to work with Visteon UK Ltd on a national and local basis.

Invest NI had a meeting planned with local management and the Department for Employment and Learning on 8 April 2009 to explore opportunities for providing financial assistance towards training activities. This meeting and any subsequent advice has been overtaken by the decision to place Visteon UK into administration.

## **DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

### **Increasing the Usage of E-mail**

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to reduce the amount of paper documentation and to increase the usage of e-mail. (AQW 5621/09)

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** For some years now, virtually all documents produced by the Department have been created electronically. Similarly, the use of electronic mail has been the norm for internal Departmental and, where possible external, communications. However, to comply with public records legislation and official PRONI guidance, all records of Departmental business had to be printed to file.

With the introduction of Records NI electronic document and records management system in 2007, the vast majority of business records are now held exclusively in electronic format, and new paper files may only be created in exceptional circumstances. Where possible, incoming paper documents are scanned and also held in Records NI. The introduction of Records NI will result in a significant reduction in the amount of paper used by the Department.

### **Cookstown Aggregates**

**Ms Purvis** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total costs of visits to Cookstown Aggregates by his Department; and the total cost of court cases against the company. (AQW 6364/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** In my Department only Agencies involved in a significant number of site visits and preparation of court cases keep detailed records of staff costs associated with this work area. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), records staff costs associated with pollution investigations including site visits and subsequent enforcement action.

NIEA received 68 reports of pollution incidents attributed to Cookstown Aggregates for the period 1996 to 2009 with total staff costs, which including site visits, estimated at £13,243.

NIEA has successfully prosecuted Cookstown Aggregates a number of times for breaches of the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 and under the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

The cost to the Department in preparing both the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 prosecutions amounted to £1,174; however, costs are not available in relation to the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 prosecution.

### Council Expenditure

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment what proportion of the rates of each Council area are spent on (i) centrally provided services; (ii) capital investment; and (iii) infrastructure. (AQW 6477/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Centrally provided services are met from councils' district fund, which is made up of income from district rates; General Grant; and any balance applied at the beginning of a financial year. Capital investment and expenditure relating to infrastructure are financed from the capital fund and separate figures are not maintained for each category.

The table below details the 2008/2009 estimates for centrally provided services and capital expenditure for each council and also expresses the figures as a proportion of the overall estimated expenditure.

(i) District Council	(ii) Centrally Provided Services (CPS) £	(iii) CPS as % of Total Expenditure	(iv) Capital Expenditure £	(v) Capital Expenditure as % of Total Expenditure	(vi) Total Expenditure £
Antrim	19,237,462	71%	7,875,552	29%	27,113,014
Ards	22,081,985	84%	4,119,600	16%	26,201,585
Armagh	19,698,480	81%	4,759,000	19%	24,457,480
Ballymena	21,286,190	89%	2,644,782	11%	23,930,972
Ballymoney	8,470,451	88%	1,100,950	12%	9,571,401
Banbridge	13,614,148	71%	5,519,000	29%	19,133,148
Belfast	148,116,247	84%	28,299,650	16%	176,415,897
Carrickfergus	12,183,789	56%	9,527,547	44%	21,711,336
Castlereagh	19,543,548	80%	4,818,200	20%	24,361,748
Coleraine	23,593,779	77%	7,010,000	23%	30,603,779
Cookstown	12,898,164	85%	2,353,000	15%	15,251,164
Craigavon	30,733,398	95%	1,720,000	5%	32,453,398
Derry	41,334,400	81%	9,725,400	19%	51,059,800
Down	20,941,376	70%	9,022,571	30%	29,963,947
Dungannon and South Tyrone	15,233,931	83%	3,222,000	17%	18,455,931
Fermanagh	16,500,836	67%	8,086,897	33%	24,587,733
Larne	11,490,182	66%	5,968,430	34%	17,458,612
Limavady	10,138,499	87%	1,573,906	13%	11,712,405
Lisburn	31,487,720	93%	2,219,100	7%	33,706,820
Magherafelt	10,253,953	91%	1,004,000	9%	11,257,953
Moyle	7,606,776	87%	1,092,145	13%	8,698,921
Newry and Mourne	27,087,346	83%	5,615,000	17%	32,702,346
Newtownabbey	28,731,743	67%	14,064,527	33%	42,796,270
North Down	24,043,659	95%	1,362,000	5%	25,405,659
Omagh	15,925,275	75%	5,285,000	25%	21,210,275

(i) District Council	(ii) Centrally Provided Services (CPS) £	(iii) CPS as % of Total Expenditure	(iv) Capital Expenditure £	(v) Capital Expenditure as % of Total Expenditure	(vi) Total Expenditure £
Strabane	11,487,388	97%	355,000	3%	11,842,388
<b>Total</b>	<b>623,720,725</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>148,343,257</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>772,063,982</b>

### Environmental Crime Unit

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment for (i) details; and (ii) success rates of the operation of his Department's environmental crime unit over the past three years. (AQW 6479/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** In an often difficult and dangerous climate, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's (NIEA) Environmental Crime Unit (ECU) has succeeded in increasing both legislative and financial enforcement against, and public awareness of, those engaged in illegal waste activities (which are criminal offences) in Northern Ireland.

The ECU receives over 1,000 reports of illegal dumping each year. Where the dumping is clearly on a commercial scale and where sufficient evidence is available and where it is in the public interest to prosecute, the ECU will recommend prosecution to the Public Prosecution Service. Since the inception of the ECU in 2003, it has secured 359 convictions and these have generated £948,115 in fines.

Courts are viewing environmental crime with increasing seriousness, as evidenced by the high level of fines that are often imposed and the jail terms handed down to some of the most serious offenders.

The ECU has been instrumental in having the first Northern Ireland environmental cases heard at the Crown Court, resulting in the first prison sentences and higher financial penalties for environmental offenders. In November 2007, the Assets Recovery Agency (ARA) (now the Serious Organised Crime Agency – (SOCA), working with NIEA secured the first UK confiscation order for £252,252 against a Tyrone farmer, relating to environmental crime.

The Unit is utilising the new and stronger powers of the Serious Crime Act 2007 to deal with serious and persistent environmental offenders and has pioneered the accreditation of financial investigators in line with the Proceeds of Crime Act. These financial investigators conduct confiscation investigations in-house, to remove illegal benefit from offenders.

Since November 2007, ARA/SOCA, working with the ECU has obtained four confiscation orders totalling £833,120, illustrating the power of this legislation in providing a deterrent and in denying funds for further offending.

On 26 March 2009, the ECU Financial Investigators secured their first confiscation independently of SOCA for £200,000.

The ECU will continue to develop its ability to tackle serious and persistent environmental offenders and will avail of all enforcement tools and legislation available in order to assist in this process.

### Changes to Driving Test

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment what changes he is proposing to make to the driving test over the next three years. (AQW 6480/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** I have no specific plans to introduce any changes to the driving test in the near future. However I am monitoring the progress of the Driving Standards Agency's 2008 consultation "Learning to Drive" which was also issued in Northern Ireland, and will consider the proposals arising from it.

### Planning Service

**Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to planning application T2006/0302/F, why Planning Service has not asked the applicant to produce (i) a daylight and sunlight study; (ii) a noise study;

and (iii) an impact study on the adjacent Old Mill Industrial Estate in relation to future expansion; and the consequences of this for job creation. (AQW 6481/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:**

- (i) An office meeting was held in Antrim Civic Centre on 4 February 2009 to discuss planning application T/2006/0302/F. As a result of issues raised at the meeting Planning Service has carried out a number of reconsultations. When all consultation responses are returned and assessed Planning Service will consider if it is appropriate to request a daylight and sunlight study.
- (ii) A noise study - In an initial consultation response received from the Environmental Services Department of Antrim Borough Council, received 9 May 2006, to application T/2006/0302 there were no noise concerns indicated other than during the construction period. Subsequently the applicant commissioned a desk top acoustic appraisal which Environmental Health were consulted on 27 November 2007 and which they considered acceptable. On 26 January 2009 an objection was submitted containing a "Detailed Rebuttal Statement" to the acoustic appraisal. In light of the "Detailed Rebuttal Statement", and a recent complaint regarding noise levels in the area by a local resident, Planning Service re-consulted the Environmental Services Department on 16 February 2009 asking if their position remains unchanged. When the response has been returned and assessed Planning Service will consider if a further noise report is necessary.
- (iii) Planning Service continues to consider this application having regard to both PPS4 and Draft PPS4. The outstanding consultation responses will help inform any impact that may result on the future expansion of the adjacent industrial premises and Old Mill Industrial Estate and the consequences of this for job creation. These issues will be fully taken into account when reaching a decision on this application.

### Northern Ireland Environment Agency

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of the Environment if land owned by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has been leased or rented to an employee, for private business. (AQW 6493/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** No land owned by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has been leased or rented to any NIEA employee for private business.

However NIEA has licensed the grazing of 126 hectares of Crossmurrin and Killykeeghan Nature Reserves at Marlbank, Fermanagh, to a Ranger employed at NIEA's Castle Archdale Country Park under a grazing management agreement, while retaining rights of access and other management responsibilities itself.

NIEA is charged with managing the Department's nature reserve lands to maintain their scientific interest in favourable condition, as was its predecessor body - the Environment and Heritage Service - which established most of the current grazing agreements. This conservation management often requires grazing at low stocking levels, avoiding certain stock medications, and grazing at times of year unattractive to the farming community.

Where a suitable licensee willing to comply with the required management regime can be found through open advertisement, NIEA uses their services thereafter for as long as they are willing to continue with the agreement.

NIEA levies an annual payment (formerly set by the Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA)) which reflects the constraints imposed. The VLA has advised that there is no need to re-advertise once a suitable partner had been identified.

In the case of the Marlbank reserves, the partner farmer (originally engaged through open advertisement) became ill and at short notice had to withdraw from the grazing agreement for the larger area. Due to the difficulties in securing satisfactory partners, NIEA was therefore delighted that one of its Rangers employed at Castle Archdale Country Park (who owned some stock and lived in that area) agreed to take over that part of the grazing. All of the employee's stock management is undertaken in his own time before and after work. This arrangement proved successful. When the farmer subsequently withdrew completely from grazing both areas, the employee took on all the grazing. Initially he paid the same amount as the previous partner. The rate is now set by NIEA's own Valuer.

As the Marlbank reserves are not grazed during May, June and July, NIEA also licences some 5 hectares of better quality farmland at Castle Archdale Country Park to this employee, so facilitating the grazing of his stock during the summer.

The employee claims single farm payment for the Marlbank reserve lands. The sum he pays the Department for the grazing reflects this. He does not receive the single farm payment for the Castle Archdale grazing, so pays at a lower rate.

NIEA also licences the grazing of its reserves on Rathlin Island at the townlands of Kebble and Kinramer North and South (215 hectares) to the RSPB Ranger for the Island. NIEA pays the RSPB for a proportion of his time for care of its reserves but does not employ him directly.

This Ranger took on the Kinramer reserve areas from a relative in 1993 following the relative's death. Records do not indicate whether the grazing was advertised, but as a satisfactory partner, his agreement has been renewed every three years. He then agreed to take on the grazing of Kebble after a previous farmer had proved an extremely unsatisfactory manager. The Ranger undertakes the care of his stock in his own time and the conservation quality of the reserves has markedly improved under his grazing management. He does not claim single farm payment.

Partner graziers must make a modest profit from their arrangement, but the primary reason for the agreements is the conservation management of special sites, not the facilitating of 'private business'.

As a result of the difficulties in securing satisfactory partners to provide grazing at its reserves, NIEA itself has now acquired a number of rare breed livestock which it uses to manage several of these special sites. This is more costly than the management agreements where a partner farmer or amenable employee can be persuaded to take up a grazing agreement for which they pay, but does enable more precise grazing and has been successful in improving the conservation condition of several reserves.

### Northern Ireland Environment Agency

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of the Environment if land owned by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and leased or rented privately, has attracted single farm payments established by the tenant or tenants. (AQW 6494/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** No land owned by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has been leased or rented to any NIEA employee for private business.

However NIEA has licensed the grazing of 126 hectares of Crossmurrin and Killykeeghan Nature Reserves at Marlbank, Fermanagh, to a Ranger employed at NIEA's Castle Archdale Country Park under a grazing management agreement, while retaining rights of access and other management responsibilities itself.

NIEA is charged with managing the Department's nature reserve lands to maintain their scientific interest in favourable condition, as was its predecessor body - the Environment and Heritage Service - which established most of the current grazing agreements. This conservation management often requires grazing at low stocking levels, avoiding certain stock medications, and grazing at times of year unattractive to the farming community.

Where a suitable licensee willing to comply with the required management regime can be found through open advertisement, NIEA uses their services thereafter for as long as they are willing to continue with the agreement.

NIEA levies an annual payment (formerly set by the Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA)) which reflects the constraints imposed. The VLA has advised that there is no need to re-advertise once a suitable partner had been identified.

In the case of the Marlbank reserves, the partner farmer (originally engaged through open advertisement) became ill and at short notice had to withdraw from the grazing agreement for the larger area. Due to the difficulties in securing satisfactory partners, NIEA was therefore delighted that one of its Rangers employed at Castle Archdale Country Park (who owned some stock and lived in that area) agreed to take over that part of the grazing. All of the employee's stock management is undertaken in his own time before and after work. This arrangement proved successful. When the farmer subsequently withdrew completely from grazing both areas, the employee took on all the grazing. Initially he paid the same amount as the previous partner. The rate is now set by NIEA's own Valuer.

As the Marlbank reserves are not grazed during May, June and July, NIEA also licences some 5 hectares of better quality farmland at Castle Archdale Country Park to this employee, so facilitating the grazing of his stock during the summer.

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### Northern Ireland Environment Agency

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of the Environment if land owned by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has been leased or rented to an employee for private business purposes without going to public advertisement. (AQW 6495/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** No land owned by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has been leased or rented to any NIEA employee for private business.

However NIEA has licensed the grazing of 126 hectares of Crossmurrin and Killykeeghan Nature Reserves at Marlbank, Fermanagh, to a Ranger employed at NIEA's Castle Archdale Country Park under a grazing management agreement, while retaining rights of access and other management responsibilities itself.

NIEA is charged with managing the Department's nature reserve lands to maintain their scientific interest in favourable condition, as was its predecessor body - the Environment and Heritage Service - which established most of the current grazing agreements. This conservation management often requires grazing at low stocking levels, avoiding certain stock medications, and grazing at times of year unattractive to the farming community.

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## Dry Recyclables

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his assessment of whether kerbside sort is more beneficial than co-mingled collections of dry recyclables; and (ii) what steps are being taken to improve the quality of this material. (AQW 6500/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Under Article 21 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) 1997 the provision of receptacles for the collection of waste is the responsibility of each district council.

Regardless of the method of collection used, there is a need to ensure that the materials being sent for recycling are of the highest possible quality. I emphasised this point in my press statement of 19 January 2009 when I encouraged everyone to play their part by placing only the appropriate materials in their recycling bins and boxes. This will ensure that the quality is as high as possible throughout the entire supply chain and is one of the key ways to ensure that sustainable markets for the materials can be found.

The delivery of high quality collections and recycling services remains a priority. My Department, with the assistance of the Waste & Resources Action Programme's (WRAP) Recycling and Organics Technical Advisory Team (ROTATE), provides support and advice to district councils in Northern Ireland for reducing residual waste for disposal and increasing recycling and diversion from landfill. Improving collection efficiencies and outputs (quantities and quality) also play an important part.

## Littering

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment what measures are being taken to reduce littering. (AQW 6502/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 places a duty on District Councils to keep land clear of litter. Significant powers are contained in the Order to help District Councils to deal with litter problems. For example, a £50 fixed penalty fine can be imposed on litter offenders. Alternatively a fine of up to £2500 can be imposed on conviction through the courts. My Department extended those powers with effect from 1 November 2005 to allow District Councils to retain the receipts from fixed penalties to help them to carry out their functions in relation to litter more effectively. Full details of the number of litter fines issued by each District Council are set out in my written answer (AQW 1723/09) to Simon Hamilton MLA.

Legislation and fines are important tools to help to reduce littering. However, I also recognise that a lot of good work is taking place to change the attitudes and behaviour of people who litter. For example, local anti-litter

campaigns and initiatives, website information and the employment of local litter wardens all play their part in reducing littering.

### Littering

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department measures levels of littering; and if the problem has worsened over the past 10 years. (AQW 6503/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** There is no statutory requirement on my Department to measure levels of littering.

My Department provides core funding to the Tidy Northern Ireland organization to work with District Councils on litter issues and the running of litter campaigns and programmes. In its 2007 Northern Ireland Borough Cleanliness Survey Tidy Northern Ireland singled out cigarette, confectionery and chewing gum litter as major contributors to the litter problem but reported an overall improvement in cleanliness levels for the third year in a row.

My Department does not hold evidence centrally on the extent of the litter problem over the past 10 years.

### Local Government Transition Committees

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of the Environment what proposed legislation will address the issues of local government councillor severance and statutory transition committees. (AQW 6544/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** I intend to bring a Local Government Bill before the House in June of this year which will include provision for severance arrangements for councillors. The Bill will also provide for the establishment of statutory transition committees and will enable the Department to specify in regulations the functions, powers, composition, etc of the transition committees.

Subordinate legislation setting out:

- the detail of the severance scheme for councillors, and
- the functions, powers and composition of the transition committees is likely to come into operation in January 2010.

### Local Government Transition Committees

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of the Environment when local government transition committees will have statutory powers. (AQW 6546/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** I intend to bring a Local Government Bill before the House in June of this year which will include provision for the establishment of statutory transition committees and will enable the Department to specify, in regulations, the functions, powers, composition, etc of these committees.

- I would anticipate that the earliest the Bill will have progressed through all its Assembly stages will be autumn 2009.
- The regulations setting out the functions, powers and composition of the transition committees are likely to come into operation in January 2010.

### Housing Developments

**Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment to provide the number of planning applications approved for housing developments with access through established parks and cul-de-sacs, that have no footpaths in place. (AQW 6571/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** I regret the Department's electronic data storage and recovery system 20/20 does not record this level of detail for every planning application. The number could only be found through a manual search of all applications approved in each Divisional Planning Office and this could not be done in the time available and would incur disproportionate costs.

## Demolition of Single Dwellings

**Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's policy in relation to demolishing single dwellings and replacing them with multiple dwellings. (AQW 6572/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Planning policy and guidance in support of the strategic approach for residential development provided in the Regional Development Strategy (RDS), is set out in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 12: Housing in Settlements, Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 7: Quality Residential Environments, Area Plans and DCAN 8: Housing in Existing Urban Areas. Further supplementary design guidance is set out in the Creating Places document and Improving the Quality of Housing Layouts in Northern Ireland (a joint Planning Service, Roads Service, CEF and NIHE publication). The policy and guidance in these documents informs the consideration of planning applications for new residential developments, redevelopment and particularly intensification of use of an existing housing site.

The thrust of current policy for all new residential development proposals is a design-led approach, emphasising contextual and amenity tests, in which proposals should respect the character and built form of adjacent housing. It also seeks to ensure that the overall development does not result in unacceptable damage to the environmental quality, residential amenity and established character of the surrounding area. Full account is also taken of the potentially damaging effect of cumulative changes in a neighbourhood.

In recognition of public concern with the intensification of development within existing residential areas a Planning Circular on the assessment of planning applications for residential development in urban areas, villages and other small settlements was issued to Planning Service staff in August 2007. In addition, my Department's Planning and Environmental Policy Group is currently working on an Addendum to PPS 7 which will be published for consultation later this year.

## Areas of Special Scientific Interest

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the annual budget for the Management Of Sensitive Sites; and to give his assessment of the adequacy of the budget. (AQW 6576/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), which are declared by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, are thought to be the most important of sensitive sites at national level. They are so declared because they are considered to be of special scientific interest by reason of their flora, fauna, geological, physiographical or other features.

ASSIs may require intervention management to help maintain or enhance the special scientific interest for which they are declared, and this would be provided through the Management of Sensitive Sites Scheme (MOSS) that is administered by NIEA.

A budget of £500,000 was made available for this scheme in the 2008/09 financial year. The same amount has been allocated for 2009/10 and NIEA is satisfied that this is adequate to meet its present needs although this will be kept under review as the number of designations increases.

There is also potential for appropriate land management within ASSIs to be secured through the application of the Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme. This scheme is administered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which currently gives priority to applications that embrace lands that are within ASSIs.

## Areas of Specific Scientific Interest

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of the Environment how many more Areas of Specific Scientific Interests the NI Environment Agency intends to declare; and what assistance his Department can give to those areas. (AQW 6577/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) intends to increase its suite of Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) from its present total of 275 to 440 by the year 2016. At this stage the declaration programme will be substantially complete.

Assistance for the management of these ASSIs for nature conservation purposes may be provided through the Management of Sensitive Sites Scheme (MOSS) that is administered by NIEA. If thought necessary, the Agency may enter into a management agreement with the owner or occupier of lands under MOSS to secure a land management regime considered necessary to sustain or enhance the special scientific interest of the ASSI. Payments made under such an agreement will vary according to the land management requirements prescribed.

Support for land management may also be provided through the application of the Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme to declared lands. This scheme is administered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development which currently gives priority to applications that embrace lands that are within ASSIs.

### Driving Theory Tests

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of the Environment why there is no office in the East Londonderry constituency where applicants can complete the driving theory test. (AQW 6600/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** There are six theory test centres strategically located throughout Northern Ireland. The centres are leased by Pearson VUE, the theory test contractor, and used to deliver the theory test for the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) and examinations for a range of other clients.

- The location of the theory test centres is designed to provide the best balance between accessibility and value for money. 2 centres (Londonderry & Ballymena) are in constituencies which border on East Londonderry.
- As a trading fund, the Driver & Vehicle Agency recovers costs from the fees charged to customers and the provision of additional theory test centres would result in a significant increase in the overall costs of the service and increase fees for all customers.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of the Environment how many employees are in his Department in the Londonderry/Derry City Council area. (AQW 6640/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The number of employees working in the Londonderry/Derry City Council area is detailed in the table below.

Department	Address line 1	Address line 2	Address line 3	Total
DOE	Crown Buildings Lisnagelvin	2 Crescent Road	Lisnagelvin	4
DOE	New Buildings Industrial Estate	New Buildings Industrial Estate	Victoria Road	30
DOE	Orchard House	Orchard House	40 Foyle Street	51
DOE	Woodburn EHS Depot	Woodburn EHS Depot	1a Crescent Road	5
			<b>Overall total</b>	<b>90</b>

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of the Environment how many employees in his Department travel from Londonderry/Derry to work in Belfast. (AQW 6641/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The number of staff who travel from County Londonderry to work in Belfast is not available.

### Working Group on PPS21

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 6338/09, how (i) people with a disability; (ii) lone parents; (iii) migrant workers; (iv) older people; (v) carers; (vi) younger people; (vii) elected representatives; and (viii) members of the wider community contact the Working Group on the PPS 21 consultation. (AQW 6654/09)

**The Minister of the Environment:** The consultation on PPS 21 is a matter for my Department and anyone wishing to make comments on any aspect of the document should do so to the Department by 31 March.

## DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

### Workplace 2010 Project

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his Department's expenditure on the Workplace 2010 project. (AQW 5513/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds):** DFP incurred total costs of £12.85m on the Workplace 2010 project. This total includes costs on legal, commercial, financial and technical consultancy and other professional fees, all costs associated with the legal challenge to the procurement and an estimate of the internal costs associated with the procurement. The costs were incurred over a 4 year period from 2005 to present.

Approximately 45% of the work associated with consultancy and professional fees remains of value to the Department.

### Government Art Collection

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the (i) estimated value; and (ii) insured value of art owned by the Executive that are not registered under the Government Art Collection. (AQW 5982/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The estimated value is £3,704,273. This figure does not include the small number of artworks owned by Departments that have not had professional valuation. Additionally, the National Museums Northern Ireland has a significant collection, but accounting requirements do not require recorded valuation.

The insured value is £3,435,082. This figure relates solely to the Arts Council Northern Ireland and Southern Education and Library Board, both of which have separate insurance for their art. NICS Departments carry their own risk against indemnity, in line with policy.

### Departmental Accounts

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to outline the process by which his Department's accounts are audited; (ii) who audits his Department's accounts; and (iii) to detail his Department's final audited accounts, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6259/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** DFP's Resource Accounts are audited under the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, and in accordance with United Kingdom Auditing Standards, as issued by the Auditing Practices Board.

The accounts are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

The C&AG formed the opinion that DFP's Resource Accounts for the 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 financial years:

- gave a true and fair view;

- had been properly prepared in accordance with Department of Finance and Personnel directions issued under the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001;
- that the information which comprises the Annual Report was consistent with the financial statements; and,
- that in all material respects, the expenditure and income had been applied to the purposes intended by the Assembly, and that the financial transactions conform to the authorities which govern them.

These accounts are published on the DFP internet site at [www.dfpni.gov.uk](http://www.dfpni.gov.uk)

### Civil Service

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to detail the number of vacancies in the Northern Ireland Civil Service at Administrative Officer level in the Belfast area; and (ii) how many staff at this grade have applied for transfer from (a) Londonderry/Derry to Belfast; and (b) other locations to Belfast, in each Government Department. (AQW 6290/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The number of vacancies in permanent Northern Ireland Civil Service posts at Administrative Officer level, located in the Belfast area, within the eleven Northern Ireland Departments and their Agencies, is set out in the attached table. The figures are given on a Full Time Equivalent (FTE) basis, broken down by Departments, at 1 February 2009.

The table also gives numbers of staff at Administrative Officer level who have applied for a transfer (a) from Londonderry to Belfast or (b) from other locations to Belfast. These numbers, on a headcount basis and broken down by Department, are also at 1 February 2009.

NICS Administrative Officer (AO) Vacancies and Transfer  
Requests (to Belfast) at 1 February 2009

Department	(i) AO Vacancies in Belfast (FTE)	(ii) AOs Requesting Transfer to Belfast (Headcount)	
		(a) from Londonderry	(b) from other locations
DARD	6	0	0
DCAL	2	0	0
DE	0	1	0
DEL	14.5	0	5
DETI	3	0	0
DFP	39	0	10
DHSSPS	5	0	0
DOE	6	0	7
DRD	9	0	0
DSD	71	4	14
OFMDFM	3	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>158.5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>36</b>

### Civil Service

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the average annual pension currently being paid to civil servants, broken down by retirement grade; (ii) the total sum of annual pension payments paid to retired civil servants in each of the last five years; and (iii) the individual annual totals of the ten largest pensions currently being paid to retired civil servants. (AQW 6408/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The average annual pension currently being paid to civil servants as at March 2009 is estimated at £7,119. It is not possible to provide this by retirement grade, as the information is not held in this format.

The estimated total sum of annual pension payments paid to retired civil servants is only available for the last 3 years. (Prior to this figures are only available for all scheme members, some of whom are not members of the NICS, and it would also include pensions paid to dependants.)

	2006/07 (£000s)	2007/08 (£000s)	2008/09 (£000s)
Civil Servant Pensioners	121,602	137,860	147,189

The overall annual total of the ten largest pensions currently being paid to retired civil servants is £612,202. I am unable to provide the individual totals as this would potentially identify individuals and would be a breach of Data Protection legislation. .

### Efficiency Savings

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the present position in relation to the planned efficiency savings across all Government Departments. (AQW 6484/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** As part of the 2007 Budget process the Executive agreed that Northern Ireland departments would be set the target of delivering 3% per annum cash releasing efficiency savings over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11.

The responsibility for the planning and delivery of efficiency savings lies with individual Ministers and departments. DFP has a role in terms of monitoring progress.

The latest assessment by my officials is that the majority of efficiency savings are on track for delivery in the current financial year.

### Civil Service

**Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what (i) specific training deficiencies have been identified across the Civil Service; (ii) steps have been taken to address these deficiencies; and (iii) whether an assessment has been made of savings in consultancy fees that could result from any additional training being undertaken. (AQW 6490/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Northern Ireland Civil Service corporate training priorities are agreed on an annual basis by departmental Personnel Directors prior to the commencement of a new financial year. For 2009/10 the key areas are:

- Those applying across the NICS - Financial Governance and Development Programmes, including Leadership and Management/Administrative Development; and
- those appropriate to limited groups of staff, within certain business areas or particular disciplines – Programme and Project Management, Policy and Legislative Skills, Freedom of Information, Essential Skills, Sustainable Development, Health and Well Being

These agreed corporate training priorities inform the learning and development provision which will be delivered by the Centre for Applied Learning (CAL), the central NICS provider of generic training, for the forthcoming financial year.

CAL has responsibility for taking forward the development of generic training interventions in order to meet the training needs identified. Work is already ongoing to meet the identified needs with review and updating of existing training provision and development of new courses where the need is not met by existing provision.

The challenging environment in which the Northern Ireland Civil Service operates requires departments to consider new ways of carrying out their business and to draw on a wide range of skills and expertise. When such skills and expertise are not available 'in-house', departments may have to consider the engagement of external consultancy services, for a finite period to complete a particular piece of work. The use of consultants can have long term benefits to the NICS where knowledge and skills are passed to staff, increasing 'in-house' expertise

and thereby reducing future need to engage external consultants. To ensure value for money, strict guidelines are in place with respect to the circumstances in which external consultants can be employed.

### Civil Service

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the criteria that is used to pay bonuses to senior Civil Servants, including the method by which this criteria is applied; and by whom it is applied.

(AQW 6504/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** In line with the recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Body, non-consolidated bonus payments have since 2002 been part of the annual pay awards to Senior Civil Servants. Eligibility for a non-consolidated bonus payment aims to reflect achievements against personal objectives or other short-term personal contributions to wider objectives, as measured against specified criteria. The criteria for payment of non-consolidated bonuses are:

- Whether corporate, business and capacity related objectives have been met or not and to what degree;
- Judgements about how the objectives were achieved and in particular whether the leadership behaviours and professional skills part of the Professional Skills for Government framework have been demonstrated or not and to what degree;
- Additional consideration may also be given to the degree of difficulty or ease in meeting the objectives in the light of actual events.

The level of non-consolidated bonus awards payable is determined by applying the following definition of how objectives were achieved:

Bonus Level	Definition
LEVEL 1	Achieved objectives despite the most difficult political, operational and economic environment, displaying exceptional leadership in the business area and more widely.
LEVEL 2	Achieved objectives despite moderately difficult political, operational and economic environment, displaying a high level of leadership in the business area and more widely.
LEVEL 3	Achieved objectives encountering only some political, operational and economic obstacles, displaying leadership in the business area and more widely.

Recommendations on annual pay awards, including any non-consolidated bonus payments, for staff at Assistant Secretary level are made at departmental pay conferences chaired by the department's Permanent Secretary and including those Deputy Secretaries with line manager responsibility. The Permanent Secretary is responsible for final decisions and for pay awards for Deputy Secretaries in his/her department. The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Senior Civil Service Pay Committee, comprising the Permanent Secretaries of all NICS departments and chaired by the DFP Permanent Secretary, provides a moderation role. The Head of the NICS, with the assistance of an independent Permanent Secretary Remuneration Committee, considers the annual pay awards, including any non-consolidated bonus payments, for Permanent Secretaries. The annual pay award, including any non-consolidated bonus payment, for the Head of the NICS is determined by the Whitehall Permanent Secretary Remuneration Committee.

### Civil Service

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many senior Civil Servants in each Department were paid bonuses in (i) 2003/04; (ii) 2004/05; (iii) 2005/06; (iv) 2006/07; and (v) 2007/08.

(AQW 6505/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The total number of Senior Civil Servants paid non-consolidated bonuses in each department in respect of performance years 2003/2004 through to 2007/2008 is as follows:

Dept	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
DE	9	11	11	13	13
DFP	23	31	36	33	36

Dept	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
DARD	14	17	15	15	15
DHSSPS	20	26	26	24	20
DCAL	5	6	5	5	3
DRD	11	17	16	13	11
OFMDFM	18	19	16	20	19
DSD	10	14	14	13	13
DETI	7	8	7	8	8
DEL	5	6	8	7	8
DOE	10	14	14	12	11

### Events in the Grounds of the Stormont Estate

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to list those who have applied to hold an event in the grounds of the Stormont Estate in the next twelve months; (ii) the nature of the events; and (iii) whether the events have been given approval or have been refused. (AQW 6545/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The following requests have been made for events in the Stormont Estate over the next 12 months:

Applicant	Date	Nature of Event	Status
Donkey Breeding Society	Date to be confirmed	Active Donkey Award Scheme	Approved, awaiting confirmation of dates from FM & dFM
Delivery and Innovation Division, DFP	Mon 25th May 2009	DFP Charity fun day (Teddy Bears Picnic)	Approved
NI Amenity Council	Tues 26th May 2009	Tree Planting	Approved
Stormont Christian Initiative	Sat 30th May 2009	Christian worship event	Approved
Race for Life - Cancer Research UK	Sun 31st May 2009	Cancer awareness event. Sponsored walk and run	Approved
Samaritans Purse	Sat 6th June 2009	Charity walk	Approved
Diabetes UK	Sat 6th June 2009	Sponsored Walk and other events in front of Parliament Blds.	Under Consideration (Provisional Date)
Cruse Bereavement	Sat 13th June 2009	Charity Walk	Approved
National Osteoporosis Society	June 2009 (awaiting new date)	Sponsored walk	Approved Subject to change of date requested
Gold Wing Club	Sat 27th June 2009	Photo shoot	Under Consideration (Provisional Date)
Guide Dogs Association	Sat 22nd August 2009	20th Anniversary walk and celebration	Approved
Cystic Fibrosis Trust	September 2009	Sponsor 'space hopper' Challenge	Under consideration
Girl Guide UK	Sat 5th Sep 2009	Centenary Celebration Event	Approved

The Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association (NICSSA) also holds events at its Pavilion Complex. These events, including cricket matches, do not require Ministerial approval. We have been advised of the following major events:

Sun 26th April 2009	Ireland Vs Worcester Cricket Match
Thu 27th Aug 2009	Ireland Vs England international cricket match

### Crossnacreevy Site

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if his Department has any responsibility for releasing or raising any finances needed because of the miscalculation of the value of the Crossnacreevy Site.

(AQW 6556/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The responsibility for delivering capital receipts targets is primarily a matter for the relevant Department. The position of Crossnacreevy is an issue affecting the Investment Strategy in 2010/11 and my Department is considering the implications of this matter along with all other capital receipt forecasts in consultation with the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development.

### Land and Property Services

**Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to improve the level of customer care in the Land and Property Services.

(AQW 6604/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Steps being taken include the implementation of a new Customer Transformation Strategy, which will co-ordinate customer services across Land & Property Services, and which takes into account best practice in other organisations in Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Improvements that have already taken place include significant reductions in backlogs of work, and improvements in handling correspondence. Land & Property Services is working closely with the first phase of Northern Ireland Direct to improve call-handling, particularly with regard to the more than 500,000 start of year rate bills to be issued at the beginning of April.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many employees are in his Department in the Londonderry/Derry City Council area.

(AQW 6642/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The number of employees in the Council area is 168.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many employees in his Department travel from Londonderry/Derry to work in Belfast.

(AQW 6643/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The number of employees from Londonderry travelling to work in Belfast is 37.

### Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to specify the number of small and medium sized enterprises in the Upper Bann constituency that have been placed on tendering lists, in the last financial year.

(AQW 6681/09)

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) do not hold tendering lists. All NICS tenders are subject to open and transparent competition.

Since May 2008 all CPD procurement has been carried out through a web based procurement portal called eSourcingNI. At present there are approximately 2700 suppliers which class themselves as SME's currently registered on the system. This number is expected to grow significantly as the system is rolled out to other Centres of Procurement Expertise in Northern Ireland

**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY****MRSA**

**Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the procedures in place in each Hospital Trust for (a) screening all hospital patients on (i) admission; and (ii) transfer, for MRSA; (b) treating patients who test positively for MRSA; (iii) notifying relatives of patients who test positively for MRSA; (d) offering medical advice to relatives of patients who test positively for MRSA; (e) washing the clothes of patients who test positively for MRSA; and (f) allowing family members to carry out minor medical care such as swabbing on patients who test positively for MRSA; and on how many occasions these procedures were not followed in the last calendar year, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4421/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey):** Details for each Trust are given in the table attached. These procedures are subject to review. [*See pages WA377-379*]

Question	NHSCT	SEHSCT	SHSCT	WHSCT	BHSCT
a) screening all hospital patients on admission;	<p>Northern Trust do not routinely screen every admission.</p> <p>The Trust screens:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>known positive MRSA cases;</li> <li>high risk areas e.g. Neonatal and Renal ICU</li> <li>any other patient following assessment who has had frequent admissions etc on the advice of the Infection Control Team and the Infection Control Doctor.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Those about to commence renal dialysis and at quarterly intervals thereafter during their treatment</li> <li>Neonates admitted to the special care baby unit from other hospitals</li> <li>Intensive care unit (ICU) patients on admission and at weekly intervals during their stay in ICU</li> <li>All patients admitted with a history of MRSA</li> </ul>	<p>The Trust has procedures for screening on admission:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>patients with a history of MRSA;</li> <li>renal patients;</li> <li>patients-admitted to HDU/ICU/Neonatal/Special Care Baby Unit; fracture patients</li> </ul>	<p>Not all patients are screened on admission for MRSA. Screening is carried out on all admissions to high risk units e.g. ICU, NICU, oncology etc and patients admitted for high risk surgery e.g. Orthopaedics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MRSA screening is generally carried out in the following situations on all sites:</li> <li>MRSA has been isolated from a laboratory sample;</li> <li>If the patient has a past history of MRSA;</li> <li>On admission to ICU/High Dependency Units and regularly thereafter;</li> <li>Prior to Cardiac Surgery.</li> <li>In addition, on each specific site:</li> </ul> <p><b>Mater site</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Patients admitted from a residential unit.</li> <li>Musgrave Park</li> <li>All orthopaedic surgery involving implants on pre-assessment.</li> <li>All rehabilitation admissions to - Meadowlands 1, 2 &amp; 3 and the Regional Acquired Brain Injury Unit.</li> </ul> <p><b>Belfast City Hospital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All admissions to vascular surgery.</li> <li>All renal dialysis patients (3-monthly).</li> <li>All patients on pre-assessment for lung/heart transplant.</li> </ul>

Question	NHSCT	SEHSCT	SHSCT	WHSCT	BHSCT
(i) Cont'd					<b>Royal site</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All admissions to the Burns Unit.</li> <li>Some Thoracic patients.</li> <li>Orthopaedic patients at pre-assessment.</li> <li>Pre-assessment clinic for some general surgery.</li> </ul>
(ii) transfer, for MRSA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All transfers, including inter Trust i.e. hospitals within the Trust</li> <li>All nursing/ residential homes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Patients being transferred to other hospitals for cardiothoracic procedures</li> <li>Orthopaedic patients prior to transfer to other hospitals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All patients from outside the Southern Trust area.</li> <li>All patients being transferred to other Trusts for cardiac or orthopaedic procedures.</li> </ul>	All patients transferred from another ward / hospital or health care facility are screened for MRSA.	If the patient is transferred from a hospital outside Northern Ireland.
(b) treating patients who test positively for MRSA;	<p>Staff from the Trust's Infection Control Team request staff to assess for the possibility of decolonisation in consultation with the patient's consultant/ medical staff and they prescribe the medication.</p> <p>If not suitable for full decolonisation, patients are assessed for the suitability for daily washes with triclosan/skisan (which also needs to be prescribed).</p> <p>Medical staff liaise with Consultant Microbiologist re antibiotic therapy, if required.</p>	<p>Following clinical/ medical assessment patients who have tested positive for MRSA would commence a course of antibiotic cream to the nostrils and antiseptic skin washes. The patient would be isolated as appropriate and standard infection control precautions heightened. Those deemed to have an MRSA infection would be commenced on appropriate antibiotic treatment.</p>	<p>A risk assessment of patients with a positive diagnosis of MRSA will be made as to whether they are infected or colonised, and the multi-disciplinary team will plan their treatment accordingly. Treatment will be either systemic treatment with antibiotics plus or minus decolonization therapy or decolonization therapy.</p>	<p>Patients who test positive for MRSA are treated with decolonisation creams to their nose, axillae and groin &amp; any broken skin areas.</p>	<p>Patients who are identified as MRSA positive are normally offered a decolonisation treatment of nasal ointment and antiseptic skin washes. There may be circumstances where this is not deemed clinically appropriate. The Belfast Trust has also developed a Care Pathway for patients admitted with MRSA or patients newly diagnosed with MRSA after admission.</p>
(c) notifying relatives of patients who test positively for MRSA;	See answer to AQW 2978/09, 12 December 2008				
(d) offering medical advice to relatives of patients who test positively for MRSA;	See answer to AQW 2978/09, 12 December 2008				

Question	NHSCT	SEHSCT	SHSCT	WHSCT	BHSCT
(e) washing the clothes of patients who test positively for MRSA;	Nurses at ward level provide patients/relatives with a home laundry advice leaflet and explain the procedure. Relatives are provided with a laundry bag for infected laundry which also has the advice written on the side of the bag.  Infection control staff issue to the ward an advice sheet re MRSA on new cases.	Information regarding washing of clothing is detailed in the DHSSPS MRSA information leaflet which is issued to patients/relatives as appropriate. Nursing staff would also provide patients/relatives with information relating to the laundering of patients' personal clothing.	Relatives will be advised to wash the clothes of all patients who test positively for MRSA separately from other clothes. They will be advised to wash the clothes at the highest temperature possible for the individual items using a non-touch technique.	Laundry is subject to thermal disinfection by the Trust laundries	Patients and relatives are advised to wash patients' clothes separately and at the highest temperature compatible with fabric, as described in the DHSSPS MRSA leaflet.
f) allowing family members to carry out minor medical care such as swabbing on patients who test positively for MRSA;	Infection Control advice would be that for close contact family members should wear apron and gloves and adhere to good hand washing.	Family members would not be involved in carrying out medical care.	Relatives who provide complex care to patients are advised on an individual basis of the infection control precautions required.  Swabbing by relatives is not a practice advocated in the Southern Trust.	The likelihood of relatives being asked to 'swab' an MRSA positive patient is very small and would only be done following clear instruction and in very specific circumstances.	Family members are not expected to undertake swabbing of patients.
How many occasions these procedures were not followed in the last calendar year?	This information is not available.				

### Genetically Modified Crops

**Mr Wilson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the types of genetically modified (GM) imported animal feed stuffs, broken down by (i) the quantity of each type; and (ii) the country of origin, in each year since 1998. (AQW 6276/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not available. There is no legal requirement to collect information on the quantities, or country of origin, of imported genetically modified feed stuffs. Only those genetically modified feeds authorised by the European Union (EU) can be imported into the EU.

### Commissioner for Children and Young People

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has had any recent meetings with the Commissioner for Children and Young People; and, if so, to give the purpose of the meetings. (AQW 6279/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I met the Commissioner on Tuesday 24 February to discuss Speech and Language services for Children and Young People.

### Residential Care Units

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the total cost of residential care units, broken down by Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 6280/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The table below sets out the total cost of residential care homes for 2007/2008, broken down by Health and Social Care Trusts.

HSC Trust	Expenditure £000s
Belfast HSC Trust	40,199
Northern HSC Trust	39,170
South Eastern HSC Trust	35,417
Southern HSC Trust	19,507
Western HSC Trust	32,796

### Young People in Residential Care

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the cost of keeping a young person in residential care, broken down by (i) residential care unit; and (ii) Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 6281/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:**

- (i) The cost of keeping a young person in residential care broken down by residential care unit is not available.
- (ii) The estimated cost of keeping a young person in residential care broken down by Health and Social Care Trust is shown in the table below;

HSC Trust	Average cost per occupied patient week (£)
Belfast HSC Trust	2,619
Northern HSC Trust	2,687
South Eastern HSC Trust	3,099
Southern HSC Trust	3,005
Western HSC Trust	3,683

**Source:** Annual Trust Financial Returns

The above unit costs take no account of individual case complexity.

### Ambulances

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his definition of the golden hour for ambulances. (AQW 6293/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The 'golden hour' is regarded as the period immediately following traumatic injury in which medical treatment is most effective; although no generally accepted definition exists. However, this term is not normally used in the context of emergency ambulance response. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service aims to respond to all life-threatening calls, including traumatic injury, within 8 minutes.

### Patients with Learning Disabilities

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the cost per year to the Health Service, of patients with learning disabilities. (AQW 6294/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The cost to the Health Service of providing learning disability services to clients in 2007/08 was £200m.

## Muckamore Abbey Hospital

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his long term plans are for Muckamore Abbey Hospital. (AQW 6295/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As supported in the Bamford Review Equal Lives Report, plans are being made at Muckamore Abbey Hospital for approximately 160 people who do not require hospital treatment, to be resettled into appropriate community services.

In addition, there are plans to provide 87 assessment and treatment beds for adults with learning disabilities who require a short-term inpatient admission but who will return home following their treatment. Of these beds, 68 will provide a service for people from the Belfast, South Eastern and Northern Health and Social Care Trust areas. The remaining 19 beds will provide a regional service for people with learning disabilities who require treatment because of offending behaviours.

## Health and Social Services Boards

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether all Northern Health & Social Services Board jobs based at County Hall in Ballymena will be retained at County Hall, as indicated in an article in the Ballymena Guardian on 12/03/2009. (AQW 6302/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** On 4 February 2009 I wrote to Chairs and Chief Executives of Health and Social Care bodies announcing my decisions on the location of the headquarters of the new HSC organisations. In the letter, the text of which is set out below, I advised that as a result of those decisions, the majority of staff who will not be working in the new headquarters will remain in their current location at 1 April 2009.

Exact numbers will depend on the outcome of current staff mapping and the application of an agreed human resources framework. However, we estimate under these arrangements over 80% of staff affected by the reforms will remain in their current location.

### **Letter issued on 4 February 2009 to Chairs and Chief Executives of Health and Social Care bodies:**

I am pleased to be able to write to you formally about the decisions on the location of the headquarters of the new HSC organisations with effect from 1 April 2009.

Through the consultation processes associated with this phase of the reforms, staff and Trades Unions have emphasised the importance of timely decisions on location and a commitment was given by the Department that an announcement would be made at the end of January 2009.

From the outset I made it clear that, irrespective of the location of the headquarters, the new structures would maintain the strong local presence that is a feature of the health and social care system. As a result of these decisions, the great majority of staff who will not be working in the new headquarters will remain in their current location in Londonderry, Ballymena, Armagh, Broughshane, Omagh, Lurgan and Belfast at 1 April 2009.

The following decisions have been the subject of a comprehensive scoping exercise for suitable accommodation, business case approval by DFP and equality screening, carried out in line with existing guidance:-

- The Health and Social Care Board headquarters will be based in the current EHSSB HQ from 1 April 2009. Commissioning Support Units will be based in Londonderry, Ballymena, Armagh and Belfast.
- From 1 April 2009, the Public Health Agency headquarters will be based in surplus DHSSPS accommodation in Stoney Road, Dundonald on an interim basis until March 2010, with other Belfast-based staff, such as the Health Promotion Agency, remaining in their current accommodation. Work will commence immediately on the development of a longer term solution for the Agency headquarters based in Belfast, which is intended to be in an area that will reflect its important role in addressing health inequalities. Agency staff will also be based in the four Commissioning Support Units.
- The Business Services Organisation headquarters will be located on an interim basis in the CSA headquarters in Franklin Street, Belfast where the great majority of its staff are currently based. Staff currently based in Londonderry and elsewhere will remain in their present location. A further comprehensive option appraisal will be carried out to determine the location and accommodation for the shared service centres. There will also be an exercise to determine the location of the permanent headquarters which will be sited outside Belfast.

- The PCC headquarters will be based in suitable leased accommodation in Antrim. Four of the five local offices will be based in the same locations as the existing HSS Councils – Broughshane, Belfast, Lurgan and Omagh. New premises will be required for the Omagh office because staff are currently housed on Trust property. The new local office for the South Eastern area will be located in Newtownards.

We estimate that under these arrangements over 80% of staff will remain in their current location and over one third of the tier 3 posts will not be in headquarters. We are also examining the scope for further regional functions to be provided from local CSUs.

These decisions have taken account of the need to minimise as far as possible the impact for the majority of staff and ensure resources are not diverted from frontline services. We are also committed to applying the agreed principles that were adopted as part of the Human Resource Framework. The Framework sets out the arrangements that will govern the management of staff and staff issues during the structural reforms and also provides important mitigating measures and protections for staff in terms of location and over the next two years we shall closely monitor its application. These steps are part of our clear commitment to make every effort to avoid compulsory redundancies.

I trust that this provides clarity on the important issue of location. Enquiries about individual circumstances should be handled by the existing employer until 31 March and by the new employer with effect from 1 April 2009.

### Health and Social Services Boards

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many jobs there have been in the (i) Northern Health and Social Services Board; (ii) Western Health and Social Services Board; (iii) Eastern Health and Social Services Board; and (iv) Southern Health and Social Services Board in (a) 2006/07; (b) 2007/08; and (c) 2008/09. (AQW 6303/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is provided in the table below.

**HSC JOBS1 AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER IN EACH HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD, 2006 - 2008**

	September 2006		September 2007		September 2008	
HSS Board	Headcount <sup>3</sup>	WTE <sup>2,3</sup>	Headcount <sup>3</sup>	WTE <sup>2,3</sup>	Headcount <sup>3</sup>	WTE <sup>2,3</sup>
Northern	256	236.7	237	214.5	203	180.8
Western	210	195.7	232	215.5	215	198.6
Eastern	333	307.5	259	233.1	273	247.5
Southern 4	383	282.6	212	186.7	186	165.8

**Source:** Human Resource Management System and Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancy Survey

**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Jobs are defined as staff in post plus vacancies at the mid-point of each financial year.
- <sup>2</sup> WTE = whole-time equivalent.
- <sup>3</sup> Figures exclude bank staff or those with a whole-time equivalent of less than or equal to 0.03. Figures include staff on secondment.
- <sup>4</sup> The Southern HSS Board figures show a significant reduction in jobs from 2006 to 2008. This was due to the transfer of Internal Audit, Social Care Training Unit and Southern Area Urgent Care Services to the Southern HSC Trust.

### Health and Social Services Boards

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Eastern Health and Social Services Board jobs there are per head of population in that Board area. (AQW 6304/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is provided in the table below.

**HSC JOBS<sup>1</sup> AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2008 IN EACH HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA PER 1,000 POPULATION.<sup>4</sup>**

HSS Board area	Jobs (headcount <sup>3</sup> ) per 1,000 population	Jobs (WTE <sup>2,3</sup> ) per 1,000 population
Eastern <sup>5</sup>	48.4	40.2
Northern	28.7	23.3
Western	38.0	30.6
Southern	33.0	25.0

**Source:** Human Resource Management System and Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancy Survey

**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Jobs are defined as staff in post plus vacancies at 30 September 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> WTE = whole-time equivalent.
- <sup>3</sup> Figures exclude bank staff or those with a whole-time equivalent of less than or equal to 0.03.
- <sup>4</sup> The 2007 mid-year estimate of population is the latest available from the General Register Office for Northern Ireland.
- <sup>5</sup> The Eastern Board area figures include jobs within Regional Services, such as Central Services Agency, Blood Transfusion Services and The Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority which are located within the Belfast area but provide services to all of Northern Ireland.
- <sup>6</sup> Ambulance Trust jobs have been allocated to the Board areas in which they are primarily based.

## Health and Social Services Boards

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Northern Health and Social Services Board jobs there are per head of population in that Board area. (AQW 6305/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is provided in the table below.

**HSC JOBS<sup>1</sup> AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2008 IN EACH HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA PER 1,000 POPULATION.<sup>4</sup>**

HSS Board area	Jobs (headcount <sup>3</sup> ) per 1,000 population	Jobs (WTE <sup>2,3</sup> ) per 1,000 population
Eastern <sup>5</sup>	48.4	40.2
Northern	28.7	23.3
Western	38.0	30.6
Southern	33.0	25.0

**Source:** Human Resource Management System and Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancy Survey

**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Jobs are defined as staff in post plus vacancies at 30 September 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> WTE = whole-time equivalent.
- <sup>3</sup> Figures exclude bank staff or those with a whole-time equivalent of less than or equal to 0.03.
- <sup>4</sup> The 2007 mid-year estimate of population is the latest available from the General Register Office for Northern Ireland.
- <sup>5</sup> The Eastern Board area figures include jobs within Regional Services, such as Central Services Agency, Blood Transfusion Services and The Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority which are located within the Belfast area but provide services to all of Northern Ireland.
- <sup>6</sup> Ambulance Trust jobs have been allocated to the Board areas in which they are primarily based.

## Health and Social Services Boards

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Western Health and Social Services Board jobs there are per head of population in that Board area. (AQW 6306/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is provided in the table below.

**HSC JOBS<sup>1</sup> AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2008 IN EACH HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA PER 1,000 POPULATION.<sup>4</sup>**

HSS Board area	Jobs (headcount <sup>3</sup> ) per 1,000 population	Jobs (WTE <sup>2,3</sup> ) per 1,000 population
Eastern <sup>5</sup>	48.4	40.2
Northern	28.7	23.3
Western	38.0	30.6
Southern	33.0	25.0

**Source:** Human Resource Management System and Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancy Survey

**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Jobs are defined as staff in post plus vacancies at 30 September 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> WTE = whole-time equivalent.
- <sup>3</sup> Figures exclude bank staff or those with a whole-time equivalent of less than or equal to 0.03.
- <sup>4</sup> The 2007 mid-year estimate of population is the latest available from the General Register Office for Northern Ireland.
- <sup>5</sup> The Eastern Board area figures include jobs within Regional Services, such as Central Services Agency, Blood Transfusion Services and The Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority which are located within the Belfast area but provide services to all of Northern Ireland.
- <sup>6</sup> Ambulance Trust jobs have been allocated to the Board areas in which they are primarily based.

### Sexually Transmitted Diseases

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many people over 46 years old have sexually transmitted diseases; and (ii) on average for how long they have suffered from this disease. (AQW 6318/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not available.

### Sexually Transmitted Diseases

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people under 45 years of age who have sexually transmitted diseases; and on average, for the length of time they have suffered from the disease. (AQW 6319/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not available.

### Abortions

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how his Department determines the legality of each abortion performed in each of the last five years. (AQW 6322/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Health and Social Care Professionals must provide care within the law in Northern Ireland. The decision to advise a woman to have a termination of pregnancy will be a matter for professional clinical judgement, made within the legal framework which currently exists in Northern Ireland.

In September 2005 the then Chief Medical Officer, Dr Henrietta Campbell, wrote to all health workers who may be involved in the termination of pregnancy setting out the legal criteria under which a termination of pregnancy may be carried out. In March 2008 the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride, wrote again reiterating the legal position.

On Friday 13 March my Department issued Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy: The Law and Clinical Practice in Northern Ireland to health professionals. This document re-states the legal criteria that must be met for a termination of pregnancy to be carried out in Northern Ireland.

## Abortions

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in which hospitals were abortions performed in each of the last five years. (AQW 6323/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Guidance issued by the Office of National Statistics states that “the identity of the practitioner as the person who carried out the procedure should be protected. Similarly the identity of the hospital as the place where the termination occurred should also be protected”. It is therefore not appropriate to state in which hospitals abortions were performed in each of the last five years.

## Abortions

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what official system his Department uses to monitor abortions. (AQW 6324/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Department of Health does not hold an official system solely for monitoring terminations of pregnancy.

The Department holds information on the Hospital Inpatient System which records information on diagnosis and procedures carried out on patients admitted to acute Health and Social Care hospitals in Northern Ireland as inpatients or day cases. This includes patients who have had a termination of pregnancy.

## Southern Health and Social Services Board

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Southern Health and Social Services Board jobs there are per head of population in that Board area. (AQW 6325/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is provided in the table below.

HSC JOBS<sup>1</sup> AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2008 IN EACH HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA PER 1,000 POPULATION.<sup>4</sup>

HSS Board area	Jobs (headcount <sup>3</sup> ) per 1,000 population	Jobs (WTE <sup>2,3</sup> ) per 1,000 population
Eastern <sup>5</sup>	48.4	40.2
Northern	28.7	23.3
Western	38.0	30.6
Southern	33.0	25.0

**Source:** Human Resource Management System and Health and Social Care Workforce Vacancy Survey

### Notes:

- Jobs are defined as staff in post plus vacancies at 30 September 2008.
- WTE = whole-time equivalent.
- Figures exclude bank staff or those with a whole-time equivalent of less than or equal to 0.03.
- The 2007 mid-year estimate of population is the latest available from the General Register Office for Northern Ireland.
- The Eastern Board area figures include jobs within Regional Services, such as Central Services Agency, Blood Transfusion Services and The Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority which are located within the Belfast area but provide services to all of Northern Ireland.
- Ambulance Trust jobs have been allocated to the Board areas in which they are primarily based.

## Northern Health and Social Services Board

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will take into account the Bain Report proposal that public sector jobs should be relocated to, not from Ballymena, when considering the location of jobs currently based in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 6326/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I made it clear from the outset in my proposals for the reform of Health and Social Care structures that, irrespective of the location of the headquarters, the new structures would maintain the strong local presence that is a feature of the health and social care system.

As a result of the decisions contained in my announcement of 4 February, it is estimated that over 80% of staff who will not be working in the new headquarters will remain in their current location in Londonderry, Ballymena, Armagh, Broughshane, Omagh, Lurgan and Belfast at 1 April 2009.

I have noted the recommendations in Professor Bain's Report and am aware that decisions around the future location of public sector jobs could have important implications for communities throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed, the wide dispersal of 70,000 health and social care sector jobs in NI, particularly high quality jobs outside Belfast, is already in evidence.

I will therefore engage with colleagues on the Executive in addressing the recommendations of the Bain Review. However, this process will inevitably take some time and you will understand that it was imperative for a number of reasons including service continuity and staff morale that the Department continued with its work, in line with current guidance, to determine the location of the new health and social care bodies from April 2009.

### Northern Health and Social Services Board

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can give an assurance that none of the jobs in the Information Services Department of the Northern Health and Social Services Board will be relocated to Belfast. (AQW 6327/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** On 4 February 2009 I wrote to Chairs and Chief Executives of Health and Social Care bodies, and trade unions, informing them that it is estimated that 80% of staff affected by these reforms will remain in their current location. From 1 April 2009 the Information Services Department of the Northern Health and Social Services Board will become part of the Health and Social Care Board. Decisions on location will take account of the need to minimise as far as possible the impact for the majority of staff. At this stage I cannot give any assurance for one particular group.

### Regional Health and Social Care Board

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if department, heads in the new Regional Health and Social Care Board will have a direct say in where their staff will be located; or will there be set criteria or a policy that will dictate where jobs are located. (AQW 6328/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I would refer the member to my answer to AQW 6302 on 30 March. The final location of staff will depend on the outcome of the current staff mapping exercise and the application of an agreed human resources framework.

### Northern Ireland Hospice Care Centre

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what economic and medical assistance his Department gives to the Northern Ireland Hospice Care Centre. (AQW 6334/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department provides Northern Ireland Hospice Care (NIHC) with a core annual grant of £130k, together with £200k recurrent funding to develop outreach nursing services at the Children's Hospice. During 2008/09, I have also agreed to a £1k allocation for social work training and awarded a grant of £7k for the provision of siblings' weekends at the children's hospice.

Arrangements are also in place for Commissioners to provide 50% funding per adult patient cared for by NIHC. For the financial year 2008/09, funding for adults' and children's services is expected to amount to £2.543m.

Although my Department does not directly provide medical assistance to NIHC, junior medical staff at the hospice are funded by the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency and medications are funded by the Central Services Agency.

### MacMillan Cancer Support

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what economic and medical assistance his Department gives to the MacMillan Cancer Support. (AQW 6335/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Firstly I would like to recognise the invaluable contribution Macmillan makes to the care of cancer patients. As one of the largest national charities Macmillan has used its considerable resources to good effect in improving wellbeing of those affected by cancer in Northern Ireland. In common with health departments in other UK jurisdictions, the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety does not supply economic or medical assistance to Macmillan Cancer Support. The services Macmillan provides are entirely independent of Government support.

### Childhood Obesity

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to tackle childhood obesity. (AQW 6342/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Tackling childhood obesity in Northern Ireland is a top priority for my Department. To this end I have established a cross-sectoral Obesity Prevention Steering Group (OPSG) with responsibility for taking forward the recommendations contained in the Fit Futures Implementation Plan. This year we shall be developing a life course approach to improve participation in physical activity, increasing awareness of healthy eating and promoting healthy weight within an over-arching Obesity Strategic Framework.

Preventing the rise of childhood obesity will have a positive impact on the health of our communities in the future and whilst I acknowledge appropriate clinical interventions have a role to play, I believe we need to place particular emphasis on the early prevention of obesity which can help reduce related health issues such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

### Outpatients Appointment Targets

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why some Health and Social Care Trusts have missed their outpatients appointment targets. (AQW 6356/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** All Trusts have made satisfactory progress towards achieving the outpatients waiting list targets set for 2008/09. However, breaches of these target times can and will occur due to a range of unforeseen circumstances including capacity issues, recruitment issues and staff absenteeism.

My Department has established robust monitoring and performance management arrangements to ensure that all Trusts continue to make progress towards the achievement of the Priority for Action elective care targets.

### Dementia

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have dementia. (AQW 6357/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information is not collected centrally, and if available, could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

### Alzheimer's Disease

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have Alzheimer's disease. (AQW 6358/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is not collected centrally, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

## Epilepsy

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been referred to Great Ormond Street hospital for treatment for epilepsy in the last three years. (AQW 6359/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The table below shows the number of people that have been referred from Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland to Great Ormond Street hospital for treatment for epilepsy in each of the last three years.

	Year		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 <sup>1</sup>
Number of patients transferred from HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland to Great Ormond Street hospital for treatment for epilepsy	2	4	9

**Source:** Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Boards

<sup>1</sup> – Data for 2008/09 includes patients transferred up to 20th March 2009.

## Family Support Workers

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 5815/09, if there will be a reduction in the number of family support workers in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, from the eight currently in the post. (AQW 6365/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Southern Health and Social Care Trust currently has no plans to reduce the number of family support workers from the eight currently in post in the Armagh and Dungannon locality.

## Ambulances

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions have taken place with private companies and charity representatives about the provision of an air ambulance. (AQW 6371/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Officials from my Department have met with representatives of the Ireland Air Ambulance charity, also known as Alpha 5 to discuss the charity's proposals for a helicopter emergency medical service. My Department has had no meetings with representatives of other private companies or charities regarding an air ambulance service.

In all contacts with Ireland Air Ambulance, officials have made clear that our policy priority for some years to come must be to invest in modernising ground ambulance services. This is essential to enable the ambulance service to improve its response to emergency life-threatening calls, to secure the best possible outcomes for patients and to deliver its performance targets.

## Alcohol Misuse

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department is doing to tackle irresponsible drinking. (AQW 6380/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department takes the misuse of alcohol very seriously, particularly binge drinking and underage drinking. Through the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs, current actions to address this issue include:

- the establishment of a binge drinking advisory group;
- the continuation of the award winning binge drinking public information campaign;
- the provision of local treatment, support and information programmes; and
- positive engagement with the drinks industry.

Latest figures from the Adult Drinking Patterns Survey show that binge drinking levels have fallen from 43% of men and 33% of women in 2005 to 33% and 29% respectively in 2008. These levels are still too high and I intend to issue an integrated action plan to address young people's drinking in the near future.

### Alcohol Misuse

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the estimated annual cost of alcohol misuse. (AQW 6381/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A 1998 report undertaken by my Department concluded that alcohol misuse was costing Northern Ireland Society approximately £770 million per year, and of this the direct costs to the Health Service were in the region of £25 million per year. As the original costings are now likely to be an underestimate my Department intends to update these over the next financial year.

### Northern Health and Social Services Board

**Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many workers in the Northern Health and Social Services Board have been informed that they, or their positions, are being moved out of the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 6382/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I understand that no workers have been given formal notice that they, or their positions, are being moved out the Northern Health and Social Services Board area.

### Mental Health Services

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what community groups and other organisations were consulted in relation to the new complaints system for mental health services. (AQW 6391/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A consultation paper, Complaints in the HPSS, was issued in November 2006. As a public consultation this was open to all individuals, groups and organisations. The consultation period closed in March 2007, by which time 91 responses had been received from a wide cross-section of interested parties including the HSC, community, voluntary, private and professional organisations.

Complaints in the HPSS and the subsequent Complaints in HSC: Standards and Guidelines for Resolution and Learning apply equally to all health and social care services. This includes, but is not specific to, mental health services.

A Summary of Responses to the consultation is available on [http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hsc\\_complaints\\_consultation\\_summary\\_of\\_responses.pdf](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hsc_complaints_consultation_summary_of_responses.pdf)

### New Health Service Dental Contract

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the new health service dental contract. (AQW 6405/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Negotiations between my Department and the British Dental association on a new bespoke primary dental care contract for Northern Ireland are ongoing. Once the contract is agreed it is intended that it will be piloted across a number of sites by the end of this year.

The new contract will allow dental services to be targeted at the groups and areas which have the highest need, provide stable and sustainable dental services, fairly remunerate dentists for the services they provide and improve the oral health of the people of Northern Ireland.

## Charges for Drugs

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the reasons why the transitional provisions contained in the Charges for Drugs and Appliances Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, whereby a reduction in the regulated charges for 2009 have been implemented, are without a pro-rata refund for those who hold a 12 month certificate of prepayment of charges valid from 2008 to 2009. (AQW 6445/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The reduced £3 charge for each prescription item dispensed, and reductions in the cost of 4- and 12-monthly Prescription Prepayment Certificates (PPCs) to £25 and £9 respectively, came into effect on 1 January 2009. It was decided not to issue pro rata refunds in respect of PPCs that had already been purchased, as for the great majority of people who purchase these, a PPC continues to represent a saving, since holders of a PPC receive unlimited, free prescriptions for the valid period.

## Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that both Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service appliances in Portstewart are available for an immediate dispatch to an emergency fire or rescue callout. (AQW 6450/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As I have indicated previously, I am considering proposals about the future of the second appliance from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Board. Pending my decision on those proposals, both appliances are available for immediate dispatch.

## Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who his special adviser is for questions regarding the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. (AQW 6452/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have no special adviser specifically for questions regarding the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. I take advice on operational matters from the Chief Fire Officer and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Board.

## Health and Social Care Trusts

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the total number of (i) Directors; (ii) Assistant Directors; and (iii) support staff employed in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 6518/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The information requested is given in the table below.

**TABLE 1: NUMBER OF (I) DIRECTORS, (II) ASSISTANT DIRECTORS AND (III) SUPPORT STAFF EMPLOYED BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT MARCH 2009.**

HSC Trust	Directors		Assistant Directors		Administrative Support Staff <sup>2</sup>	
	Headcount	WTE <sup>1</sup>	Headcount	WTE <sup>1</sup>	Headcount	WTE <sup>1</sup>
Belfast	9	9.0	38	38.0	3,511	2,990.3
Northern	6	6.0	30	29.7	2,082	1,740.7
South Eastern	8	8.0	39	39.0	1,495	1,256.9
Southern	8	8.0	33	32.0	1,768	1,521.2
Western	8	8.0	25	25.0	1,770	1,582.3
Total	39	39.0	165	163.7	10,626	9,091.4

**Source:** Northern Ireland Health & Social Care Trusts

**Notes:**

- <sup>1.</sup> WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
- <sup>2.</sup> Administrative Support Staff includes all Administration staff employed within HSC Trusts below Director / Assistant Director level.
- <sup>3.</sup> Northern HSC Trust reported two vacancies at Director level, and there is currently one Director level vacancy at Belfast HSC Trust.

### Senior Nursing Positions

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area, who took early retirement, are back in senior nursing positions. (AQW 6522/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Trust management have advised there are no nurses that availed of early retirement, re-engaged in senior nursing positions.

### Midwife-Led Maternity Unit in Omagh

**Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the estimated number of women expected to have 'no risk' labours (i) if his Department will establish a community midwifery led unit in Omagh; and (ii) to detail the outcome of the recent consultation exercise on this matter. (AQW 6541/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:**

- i) I want to give my fullest consideration and to take the necessary professional advice on all of the issues raised in the Western Board's feasibility report on the provision of a midwife-led maternity unit in Omagh. I will make an appropriate announcement when I have done so.
- ii) The key issues which emerged from the Western Board's study were:
  - Mother and baby safety;
  - The need for an effective transfer system in the case of an emergency;
  - Eligibility criteria;
  - The availability of skilled midwives;
  - Impact on plans for the new south west acute hospital;
  - The long-term sustainability of a midwife led unit;
  - Impact on existing obstetric units at Altnagelvin and Erne hospitals; and
  - Costs and value for money.

### Replacing Light Bulbs in Hospitals

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the protocol is for replacing light bulbs in hospitals in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area; and the associated costs of each replacement. (AQW 6562/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Western Health and Social Care Trust replace lamps as soon as reasonably practical after a lamp failure is notified to the Trust's Estates Department. The average cost of routine lamp replacement is £5.40. This covers all lamps used in WHSCT facilities such as compact fluorescent, fluorescent, low voltage, filament lamps, tungsten halogen and other discharge lighting.

### Nursing Staff

**Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what opportunities are available in the Western Health and Social Care area for young nursing staff to gain experience. (AQW 6563/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Newly qualified nurses are recruited at Band 5, and following induction, are provided with a preceptor during the first 6-12 months of their experience to provide them with support and enable them build their confidence within a safe environment. A wide range of

skills training is funded by my Department and available through the In-service Education and Development Consortium.

Opportunities are also provided for nursing staff to transfer between different specialties within the service area that they are qualified to work. This can be either to meet individual requests or service needs. This helps broaden their overall experience and opens up new career and promotion opportunities.

### Health and Social Services Boards

**Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to confirm his commitment to Health and Social Services Boards, following its reorganisation on 1 April 2009, that 80% of public sector jobs will remain in local areas and that senior positions will not be centralised in Belfast; and (ii) if he will act in accordance with the recommendations of the Bain Report in relation to the location and decentralisation of public sector jobs. (AQW 6595/09)

#### The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) In my 4 February 2009 announcement on the location of the headquarters of the new organisations, it was estimated that over 80% of staff would remain in their current location and over one third of the Tier 3 posts would not be in headquarters. Exact numbers and the final location of staff will depend on the outcome of current staff mapping and the application of an agreed human resources framework.
- (ii) I will engage with colleagues on the Executive in addressing the recommendations of the Bain Review. However, this process will inevitably take some time and you will understand that it was imperative for a number of reasons including service continuity and staff morale that the Department continued with its work, in line with current guidance, to determine the location of the new health and social care bodies from April 2009.

### Ambulances

**Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many ambulances service the Mid Ulster area. (AQW 6621/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There are two ambulance stations in Mid-Ulster at Magherafelt and Cookstown. The ambulance resources based at these stations are shown in the table below.

Ambulance Station	A&E ambulances	Intermediate Care Vehicles	Patient Care Service vehicles
Magherafelt	5	4	-
Cookstown	1	-	2

It is important to recognise that, as the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service dynamically deploys its emergency response fleet and will send the nearest available appropriate resource to 999 calls, it is possible that responses to 999 calls from the Mid-Ulster area will not originate from Magherafelt or Cookstown ambulance stations.

### Ambulances

**Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the average waiting time is for patients requiring ambulance transport to the Royal Victoria Hospital from the (i) Mid-Ulster Hospital; and (ii) Antrim Area Hospital. (AQW 6622/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The arrangements for the inter-hospital transfer of patients apply uniformly across all hospitals in Northern Ireland. The hospital where the patient is resident makes a booking for transport with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) clinically categorising the patient transfer as either “emergency” or “routine”.

NIAS has advised that the average waiting time for inter-hospital transfers is not routinely collected and could not be obtained without disproportionate cost.

### Ambulances

**Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the transfer arrangements are for patients travelling from the (i) Mid-Ulster Hospital; and (ii) Antrim Area Hospital to the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQW 6623/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The arrangements for the inter-hospital transfer of patients apply uniformly across all hospitals in Northern Ireland. The hospital where the patient is resident makes a booking for transport with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) clinically categorising the patient transfer as either “emergency” or “routine”.

Emergency transports receive an immediate response from the nearest appropriate emergency ambulance. Non-emergency transfers receive a planned response in line with timeframes outlined by the clinician.

These procedures are well established and have served patients well for many years.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many employees are in his Department in the Londonderry/Derry City Council area. (AQW 6644/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The DHSSPS has 35 employees working in Waterside House, Londonderry at 26 March 2009.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many employees in his Department travel from Londonderry/Derry to work in Belfast. (AQW 6668/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The DHSSPS currently has 6 employees with an address in Londonderry/Derry who work in the Belfast area.

The 6 officers currently have an address with a postcode of BT47 and BT48.

### Scottish Medicines Consortium

**Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the Scottish Medicines Consortium’s legal standing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 6724/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC) assesses and makes recommendations on all new drugs to NHS Boards and their Area Drug and Therapeutics Committees across Scotland. SMC has no legal standing in Northern Ireland. SMC guidance is not currently reviewed or assessed as applicable in Northern Ireland.

### Forum For Action On Substance Abuse

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what financial assistance he will give the Forum For Action On Substance Abuse in North Down as its funding will end in two months. (AQW 6789/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The allocation of local funding, as well as the identification of local needs and local priorities, is the responsibility of the local Health and Social Care organisations. In the case of the FASA initiative in North Down neither the Department nor the local Drug and Alcohol Team provided funding for its establishment.

I do want to ensure the provision of an appropriate range of services across Northern Ireland to support those individuals and families affected by substance misuse. The new Public Health Agency, established on 1 April 2009, will therefore consider how best to provide resources for initiatives that help reduce the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse across Northern Ireland to organisations such as FASA and others.

## Young People with Drugs and Alcohol Problems

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to assist young people with drugs and alcohol problems. (AQW 6792/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Health and Social Care (HSC) commissions and funds a number of specialist services at a local level that provide treatment through HSC facilities for young people with drug and alcohol dependencies. These include:

Substance Misuse services for young people aged 17 and under based on a 4-tier model;

Tier 2/3 Counselling, Support & Mentoring Services for young people under 18; and

Tier 3/4 specialist treatment services for young people under 18

In addition, a number of education, awareness raising and training initiatives have been put in place, and all residents (including young people) also have access to generic primary/secondary care services who will meet other physical/mental health needs that may arise because of dependency to drugs and/or alcohol.

## Children in Need

**Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's guidance in relation to those children categorised as 'children in need'. (AQW 6817/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Article 17 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 sets out the circumstances in which a child is to be considered 'in need'. Part IV of, and Schedule 2 to, the Order set out the main responsibilities of Health and Social Care Trusts for children in their areas who are in need and their families; and children in need whom they look after. Guidance on the statutory framework and its underlying principles is contained in eight volumes of Children (NI) Order 1995 Guidance and Regulations.

A single assessment framework, Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland, (UNOCINI) has been developed for use by those involved in assessing the needs of children in need in Northern Ireland. Guidance has also been issued to support those using the new framework.

## Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

**Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what recognition his Department gives to fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome/M.E. (AQW 6836/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In January 2008, my Department endorsed the NICE clinical guidelines on the diagnosis and management of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS) in adults and children in Northern Ireland. These guidelines are endorsed as developmental standards, and the Department expects Trusts to take account of them in planning and delivering their services.

In relation to Fibromyalgia, the cause of this condition remains unknown. The variability of symptoms in potential sufferers means that there is difficulty in diagnosis. At present there is no dedicated fibromyalgia service and no diagnostic test or cure for the illness.

The majority of care for both conditions is provided by general practitioners. Patients also have full access to a wide range of treatment and support services in secondary, primary and community care settings, including neurology services and mental health services.

## Hip Arthroscopy Surgery

**Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of hip arthroscopy surgery provision. (AQO 2411/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am advised that hip arthroscopy is a relatively new procedure for the treatment of some hip conditions and the Health Boards have not yet agreed to commission it on a routine basis. The Health Boards have however asked clinicians to submit an evidence based business case for the development of a hip arthroscopy service and the Boards will wish to consider this in full before

making decisions on the recurrent funding of a hip arthroscopy service in Northern Ireland. In the interim, where this procedure is recommended on clinical grounds, the Health Boards will consider funding the treatment of individual patients through their standard procedures for extra-contractual referral. The alternative treatment is physiotherapy and medical therapy and this may be offered where it is considered clinically appropriate.

### Action Cancer Big Bus

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have had cancer detected through the Action Cancer Big Bus and what financial assistance is provided by his Department for this service. (AQO 2412/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety does not hold any data on how many people have had cancer detected through the Action Cancer Big Bus. The Department does not provide any financial assistance for this service.

### Neighbourhood Renewal

**Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what liaison he has had with the Minister for Social Development in relation to the future for neighbourhood renewal. (AQO 2413/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** On my behalf officials of this Department have had significant and ongoing contact with DSD. This clearly reflects that tackling health inequalities is one of my key priorities and in this respect there is a strong correlation with the work of Neighbourhood Renewal.

### Midwives

**Mr Maginness** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to increase the number of qualified midwives to meet the long term need. (AQO 2414/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** A review of the Nursing and Midwifery workforce is currently underway. The review is examining current and future recruitment and retention issues impacting on the workforce, and will provide a prediction of future supply and demand for midwives over the next five years.

I have increased midwifery training commissions for academic year 07/08 and 08/09. Over the last 3 years I have increased midwifery training commissions by 40%, from 44 to 62 places. Further decisions will be taken once I have considered the recommendations of the workforce review. However there are no plans to reduce the midwifery training numbers.

### Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-Being

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his priorities for the new Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-Being. (AQO 2415/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Public Health Agency, once established on 1 April, will be asked to develop plans and actions to improve the health of the population, to protect the health of the population and to tackle the particular challenge of reducing health inequalities. There are already clear priorities addressing these issues in the form of Public Service Agreements which cover issues such as life expectancy, smoking, sexual health, obesity, alcohol misuse promoting mental health and suicide.

On the health protection side, the Agency will take forward plans in regard to reducing healthcare associated infections, preparing for pandemic flu and screening programmes.

Following its establishment on 1 April, the new Public Health Agency will be requested to submit its plans to address these priorities, for my approval.

## Efficiency Targets

**Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of his Department achieving 3% efficiency targets. (AQO 2416/09)

**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 my Department but must be achieved if I am to deliver my service developments and maintain existing services. We are on course to deliver the full complement of efficiencies for 2008/09.

## Resettlement Programme

**Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans there are to increase day care under the Resettlement Programme. (AQO 2417/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The whole ethos behind the Resettlement Programme is about ensuring the betterment of the lives of people who currently live in learning disability hospitals. It necessarily includes further investment in the community infrastructure to enable those people being resettled to remain in the community and to support them to live independently. Day care services are part of that additional investment. The additional resources of £33m (£17m recurrent) for learning disability services which I secured under the Comprehensive Spending Review for the period 2008-2011 are being used to provide a range of additional services including day care.

My officials are currently in the process of gathering comprehensive information in order to support robust future bidding processes. Any new resources secured for the Resettlement Programme beyond 2011 will also include an element to be invested in the community infrastructure which will include day care.

## Home Births

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's policy in relation to women who want to give birth at home. (AQO 2418/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department's maternity policies recognise that, for the majority of women, pregnancy and childbirth are normal life events and that promoting women's experience of having choice and control in childbirth can have a significant effect on children's healthy development.

A home birth is therefore an option open to women experiencing a low risk pregnancy and who wish to have their baby delivered at home. Each Trust will have its own arrangements and guidelines for the facilitation and support of home births within their maternity services.

## Children's Development and Life Chances

**Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to help parents in poverty to improve the development and life chances of their children. (AQO 2419/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Department's family and parenting strategy, Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland, gives a commitment to work towards the elimination of poverty, particularly child poverty, through supporting parents who experience poverty. It seeks to increase the range of services available to support families and parents; to ensure that those services are accessible to all families and parents; to improve the range of information available to families and parents to enable them fulfill their duties in bringing up children and to promote multi-agency working. In addition, the public health strategy Investing for Health recognised poverty as a major determinant of health and well-being and as a result many actions are underway at regional and local level in partnership with others.

### A&E Patient Priority

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the accepted criteria for determining the priority of patients to be seen at A&E departments. (AQO 2420/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Patients attending A&E, other than emergency or cases such as blue-light ambulances or cardiac cases, are assessed initially by a skilled triage nurse and then treated on the basis of clinical priority.

In addition, the current waiting time target requires Health and Social Care Trusts to ensure that from April 2008, 95% of patients attending A&E are either treated and discharged home, or admitted within four hours of their arrival in the department; no patient should wait longer than 12 hours.

### Southern Trust: Agency Staff Spend

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline why £5 million was spent on agency staff in one year, in the Southern Trust area, and what action is being taken in relation to staff recruitment to avoid further expense of this nature. (AQO 2421/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There are many reasons why Health and Social Care Trusts may appoint agency staff, for example, during periods of temporary staff shortage it may be necessary to use agency staff to provide short-term cover for essential services, when there is no viable alternative.

The Southern Trust has advised me that they are actively reviewing their agency usage and an Agency Protocol has recently been introduced to facilitate robust monitoring of agency usage.

The Trust has an on-going campaign of recruitment to minimise the need for agency staff and is actively seeking to recruit banks of staff, which can be utilised as required to reduce the need for agency usage. In addition the Trust reports that it continues to complete its restructuring process which will stabilise its staffing compliment.

The Southern Trust assures me that it is committed to providing an excellent service to all patients and clients within its catchment area and recognises the need to balance the provision of high quality services within tight financial constraints.

### Extended Schools Programme

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has had with the Minister of Education in relation to future funding for Extended Schools Programmes. (AQO 2422/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Extended Schools Programme is an initiative of the Department of Education and as such the future funding of the programme is an issue for that department. Therefore, I have not had discussions with the Minister for Education regarding the funding of this initiative.

### Maternity Services

**Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the pressures facing maternity services. (AQO 2423/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Maternity services in Northern Ireland are of a very high standard, professionally delivered and safe.

The service is currently facing a number of pressures due to increasing numbers of births and the need to reconfigure services to meet modern standards. These pressures are constantly monitored and in response I have recently announced significant investments in the maternity units at both Craigavon and Daisy Hill along with the establishment of a Community Midwife Unit at Lagan Valley Hospital. In addition the EHSSB has recently completed a review of maternity provision in their area aimed at ensuring that there is sufficient capacity moving forward to meet demand.

I am committed to providing high quality, accessible services for all parents and babies.

### Efficiency Savings

**Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the efficiency savings proposals outlined by Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQO 2425/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** My Health Committee paper in October included an indicative split of Trust proposals between different types of efficiencies, to be obtained by 2010/11, as follows:

	NI £m
(1) RPA	40
(2) Pharmacy and regional procurement	23
(3) Income generation	2
(4) Productivity and general efficiency	120
(5) Service redesign	59
<b>Total 2010/11</b>	<b>244</b>

Final decisions about proposals under consultation may change the split shown between the different categories.

## DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Road Maintenance

**Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Regional Development to give an assessment of the cost of providing lighting along the full length of the A1 between Newry and Lisburn. (AQW 6308/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy):** My Department's Roads Service has advised that the A1 between Lisburn and Newry is approximately 47 km long, with approximately 5 km currently having lighting, or in the process of being lighted. This is mainly made up of lighting at roundabouts and other intersections, together with the approaches to these features.

The cost of lighting the remaining 42 km of the A1 is estimated to be around £357,000 per km with a total estimated cost of around £15,000,000.

It should also be noted that this estimate does not include the cost for the following:-

Establishing around 80-100 electrical supply points. These supply points would have to be served from the NIE network. Given the isolated rural nature of the terrain and the remoteness of these networks from the A1, the costs involved are likely to be very substantial.

Excavating in adverse ground conditions, as much of the route of the A1 passes through a rock sub-base.

Upgrading older existing lighting systems on the A1 to match the standard of the new lighting.

No estimate has been made in respect of future electricity and maintenance costs.

### Roads Service

**Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Regional Development to breakdown the levels of funding allocated to each section office in his Department's (i) Eastern; and (ii) Southern Divisions. (AQW 6309/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads 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 Eastern and Southern Divisions for maintenance operations, as at 23 March 2009, is provided in the tables below.

**ROADS SERVICE EASTERN DIVISION**

Section Office	Funding Allocated
Belfast North	£3,779,000
Belfast South	£3,302,000
Castlereagh	£1,928,000
Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus	£3,718,000
North Down	£1,979,000
Lisburn	£5,495,000

**ROADS SERVICE SOUTHERN DIVISION**

Section Office	Funding Allocated
Ards	£2,326,000
Armagh	£4,650,000
Banbridge	£2,817,000
Craigavon	£3,560,000
Down	£3,828,000
Newry	£4,278,000

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.

**Portstewart to Coleraine, Cromore Road**

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans there are to upgrade the Portstewart to Coleraine, Cromore Road, in the next two years. (AQW 6333/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is considering a proposal to provide right turning facilities at the Cromore Road / Islandtasserty Road / Agherton Road, staggered junction. However, progress of this scheme would be dependant on the successful acquisition of land and the availability of funding over the next two years.

## Road Maintenance

**Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the expenditure for road maintenance in the (i) Western Region; (ii) Dungannon; (iii) Cookstown; and (iv) Magherafelt for (a) 2004/05; (b) 2005/06; (c) 2006/07; (d) 2007/08; and (e) 2008 to present. (AQW 6336/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service spend on roads maintenance, in Western Division, Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt District Councils, in each financial year from 2004/2005 to 28 February 2009, is set out in the table below.

### ROADS SERVICE MAINTENANCE EXPENDITURE

Financial Year	Western Division	Dungannon District Council	Cookstown District Council	Magherafelt District Council
2004/2005	£24,065,000	£4,559,000	£2,615,000	£2,308,000
2005/2006	£23,218,000	£4,252,000	£2,227,000	£2,344,000
2006/2007	£23,267,000	£4,481,000	£2,319,000	£2,242,000
2007/2008	£25,383,000	£4,818,000	£2,367,000	£2,818,000
2008 to 28 February 2009	£22,419,000	£4,116,000	£2,022,000	£2,508,000

## Footpath Resurfacing Schemes

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development what footpath resurfacing schemes are planned for the Donaghadee and Millisle areas, in the next financial year. (AQW 6360/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are no plans to carry out any footway resurfacing schemes in Donaghadee and Millisle during the next financial year.

## Steria/Crystal Alliance

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much of the £70 million paid to Steria/Crystal Alliance has been recouped following termination of the contract between them and NI Water. (AQW 6397/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the contract with Steria was awarded in 2006 and was expected to last seven years at a total cost of £70 million. At the end of December 2008 NIW had paid approximately £27 million under the contract. While the termination of the contract with Steria was announced on 16 December 2008 it only comes into effect on 15 December 2009 and NIW is currently negotiating with Steria on the commercial terms of the termination.

## Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much NI Water have spent on bottled water since 1 April 2007. (AQW 6398/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it holds a limited stock of bottled water to provide an emergency supply to customers during prolonged interruptions to the public water supply. NIW does not provide bottled water for use by staff except in the Duncrue Street Incinerator control room where welfare and health and safety considerations require the availability of drinking water but restrict the introduction of mains water in close proximity to sensitive electronic equipment. Since 1 April 2007, a total of £25,718 has been spent on bottled water, including £757 on the water used in the control room.

## Public Transport

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development which disability groups he has met in relation to public transport issues facing people with disabilities. (AQW 6411/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Since taking up post I have met regularly with the chairman and representatives of the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac). Imtac is the main source of independent advice to Government and others in the North on all transport issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people. My most recent meeting with Imtac, on 19 March 2009, included representatives from Age Sector Platform, Disability Action, East Belfast Trust Sight Support Team, Guide Dogs, Mobilise, the Omnibus Partnership and Shopmobility.

On 17 February I met a delegation from the All Party Assembly Group on Disability. It included representatives from Disability Action, Guide Dogs, the Omnibus Partnership and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People.

In addition, as part of other meetings with MLAs and others, I meet people who represent the age and disability sectors.

## Travelwise Safer Routes to School Initiative

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1968/09, the expected timescale for the implementation of the Travelwise Safer Routes to School Initiative. (AQW 6413/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that since the Travelwise Safer Routes to School Initiative was launched in 2004, it has worked in 151 schools in the North, involving over 45,000 pupils and has committed over £2.3 million to this initiative.

Given the impact of the initiative to date, and the further potential benefits to be realised, at the present time Roads Service intends, within available resources, to roll out the Safer Routes to School programme.

On average, there are 30 places available each year, and schools are encouraged to self-nominate for inclusion on the programme.

## New A1 Dual Carriageway

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development what actions are being taken to control dust pollution during the building of the new A1 dual carriageway from Cloughogue to Beechill, and the frequency of actions taken. (AQW 6419/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that the possibility, that local air quality may be temporarily reduced, as a result of the construction of the A1 Beech Hill to Cloughogue strategic road improvement, was considered in the Environmental Statement (ES) for the scheme. The ES, which was published in 2004, was also the subject of a Public Inquiry in 2005. The ES recognised that the scheme required substantial earthworks, due to the undulating topography and that during prolonged dry periods, higher than normal airborne dust levels may pose a problem, with properties within about a 50 metre radius of the works, being most affected.

The ES requires Lagan Ferrovial, the Construction Contractor for this Design Build Finance and Operate project (the contractor), to take measures to minimise the amount of dust created by the works. In this respect Roads Service expects the contractor to exercise current good practice, to control dust emanating from the works.

While there have been concerns about dust generated by the works, these have been addressed through direct contact with the contractor's Community Liaison Officer. An example of the type of contact is the ongoing Community Liaison Panel Meetings, which are facilitated by the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council.

I have been informed, that in response to a particular complaint about dust arising from the ongoing processing of rock material, being undertaken north of Cloughogue, the contractor advised you of the minor operational changes, which were implemented following a visit to the site, by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Pollution Control Department and the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council.

These works are also subject to a Pollution Prevention and Control Permit, issued by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Pollution Control Department.

I am further advised that, in consultation with the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council, the contractor has engaged the services of the School of Chemistry at the Queen's University of Belfast, to set up and monitor dust at 3 strategic locations near the works. Results for the period, 20 October 2008 to 29 January 2009, were presented at the recent meeting of the Community Liaison Panel, held on 13 March 2009, and I understand all councillors were invited to this meeting.

While an interpretative report from Dr Patricks, of Queen's University is awaited, the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council, referring to a German standard in the absence of a corresponding UK standard, indicate that at present, there does not appear to be a dust nuisance, at the locations being monitored.

The measures, which the contractor is implementing to control dust, are therefore continuing as is the monitoring, which the contractor and other agencies are undertaking to assess their effectiveness.

### New A1 Dual Carriageway

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development what actions are being taken to keep existing nearby roads and pavements clean during the building of the new A1 dual carriageway from Cloughogue to Beechill, and the frequency of actions taken. (AQW 6420/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Environmental Statement (ES) for the new A1 dual carriageway, from Cloughogue to Beechill, recognises that wet weather creates problems of mud being dispersed onto the public road network, by vehicles leaving the works site.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that recommendations for controlling this problem include, access being limited to designated points and the washing of mud from construction vehicles. In this respect, Lagan Ferrovial, the Construction Contractor for this Design Build Finance and Operate project (the contractor) has two water bowzers and two road sweepers, available on the new dual carriageway site, to clear debris from the carriageway. Additional sweepers are available should conditions deteriorate. The contractor also has three foremen and twelve supervisors on the ground, at any one time, who can respond, should this problem arise.

I understand that construction works have now reached a stage where access to the site is limited to three locations, and Roads Service's site representatives have asked the contractor to consider improving facilities, to prevent mud being carried onto the carriageway. Roads Service staff and their site representatives will continue to monitor the conditions of the roads adjacent to accesses to the site, to identify problems of mud on the carriageway and to inform the contractor where action is required if this is observed.

### New A1 Dual Carriageway

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development how the amenity of housing developments along the route of the new A1 dual carriageway will be protected when the road is built. (AQW 6421/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that even before publication of the Environmental Statement (ES), when the specimen design for this strategic road improvement was being developed, Roads Service and their technical advisers met, on several occasions, with the Confederation of Community Groups in Newry. The purpose of this was to describe and explain the developing project and to listen to the Group's concerns.

The discussions which took place at that time, resulted in the provision of the Martin's Lane Link, which will cross the new dual carriageway at the location of the former footbridge. This short link road addressed several of the community's concerns, including those about traffic, particularly commercial vehicles, rerouting through the residential areas and passing the several schools in the vicinity, following the closure of the Martin's lane access onto the bypass. This link also provides access, particularly for children from the residential areas on the east side of the new road, to the Corrinshogo playing fields. Requests for a secure boundary between the residential area and the new road were also noted at that time.

The Confederation of Community Groups also submitted comments, following publication of the ES and participated effectively in the subsequent Public Inquiry. For example, in response to the Groups representations

and the Inspectors' recommendation, substantial lengths of footway are being provided on the new minor road network, which is being constructed on the west side of the new dual carriageway, in the vicinity of Chancellors Road. This will provide links from the residential areas into the countryside, particularly towards the Bernish view point. Roads Service has also agreed that mature planting would be provided to offset the visual impact at the areas most affected by the scheme. In this respect, the landscape designers from Lagan Ferrovia, the Construction Contractor for this Design Build Finance and Operate project (the contractor) have already provided proposals to the Parkhead Crescent representative, who, at a meeting with Roads Service on 20 March 2009, requested further consultation with the contractor's designers.

The scheme design aims to meet the "Relevant Air Quality Standards" and maintain road traffic noise below proscribed levels. For example, a low noise surfacing material is proposed for the main carriageway, throughout the scheme. Safety barriers will also be provided, as indicated by the normal risk assessment for the entire route.

While the alignment and main characteristics of the scheme have been confirmed through the Statutory Procedures, which included Public Inquiries, the contractor has appointed a Community Liaison Officer, and a Community Liaison Panel has been formed. Regular meetings with the Community Liaison Panel, which are being facilitated by the Environmental Health Department of Newry and Mourne District Council, are formally reported to the council. These provide an ongoing opportunity for those in the community, who have concerns about the scheme, particularly during this construction stage, to have these matters addressed.

### New A1 Dual Carriageway

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of whether the building of the new A1 dual carriageway will block out light, be overbearing, and present a potential health and safety hazard to the residents of Parkhead Crescent, Newry. (AQW 6422/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Environmental Statement (ES) includes specific reference to the "Visual Impact on dwellings at Parkhead and Carnagat closest to the A1 (approx.65 No)". It describes this impact as "Adverse to Substantial" particularly since the "first line of houses [Parkhead Crescent] would be approximately 20 metres from the toe of the 8-10 metre high embankment. Views of distant hill tops above the railway embankment would be partially obscured or lost." My Department's Roads Service has advised that the primary measures for mitigating this visual and landscape impact, is the provision of appropriate planting, which was the subject of discussion at the ES Public Inquiry and included in the Inspectors' recommendation.

Therefore, while the ES for the scheme does not specifically indicate that the new road embankment, immediately adjacent to Parkhead Crescent, would block out light, be overbearing, or present a potential health and safety hazard, it does recognise the substantial adverse visual impact which this new road feature will have on the adjacent houses. In this respect, the ES includes recommendations, by way of planting, to mitigate the impact, which were in due course reinforced through the Public Inquiry procedure. I understand that consultation is currently continuing between Roads Service, the landscape designers from Lagan Ferrovia, the Construction Contractor for this Design Build Finance and Operate project and the representatives of Parkhead Crescent, in relation to the planting of this embankment.

It should be noted that the Independent Inspectors, in commenting on the ES for the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme, described it as "an exhaustive examination of the impact of this scheme on the local environment and that it attempted to balance the conflicting interests in accordance with standard procedures."

### Water Resources Management Plan

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to introduce a water resources management plan, and if so, when this will occur. (AQW 6426/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has a Water Resource Strategy for the period up to 2030 which was prepared in 2002 and reviewed in 2007. The strategy is used for asset management and operational planning purposes and NIW is currently planning a further update. It intends to award a commission for a new Water Resource Management Plan during April 2009 and expects the Plan to be completed by mid 2010 when any recommendations will be incorporated into the planning process for the price control review in 2013.

### Land and Property Services

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many water bills for commercial customers are based on information received from Land and Property Services; and how many of these bills have been amended due to inaccurate information provided by Land and Property Services. (AQW 6432/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that from April 2008 over 26,000 unmeasured bills have been issued based on a Net Annual Value provided by Land and Property Services.

NIW does not keep records that identify amended water bills resulting from incorrect data supplied by Land and Property Services, and is therefore unable to provide the details sought.

### Resurfacing Footpaths

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Regional Development how his Department prioritises the repaving of footpaths. (AQW 6460/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has a statutory duty to maintain the public footways in a safe and serviceable condition. Roads Service operates a system of regular safety inspections to ensure that essential response maintenance is identified and completed, as necessary.

These safety inspections help identify the condition of the public footways, and this information is then used in the preparation and prioritisation of Roads Service's annual footway reconstruction and resurfacing programme.

### Resurfacing Footpaths

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Regional Development how his Department prioritises the resurfacing of footpaths. (AQW 6461/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service undertakes an annual programme of footway reconstruction and resurfacing works, subject to the availability of financial resource.

This programme is prepared on the basis of a number of factors encompassing the footway usage, general surface condition, structural deformation, public enquiries and public liability claims.

### Resurfacing Footpaths

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the budget for repairing footpaths in South Belfast. (AQW 6462/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that its budgets for particular areas of work are not allocated on a Parliamentary Constituency, or Council ward basis.

However, I have been advised by Roads Service that, in the 2008/09 financial year, the budget for repairing the public footways in the Belfast South Section Office area, was £228,000. Belfast South Section Office's area of responsibility covers parts of East, South and West Belfast.

The budget allocations for the 2009/10 financial year are presently being finalised, and it is anticipated that the financial allocation for this function will be similar.

### Resurfacing Footpaths

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the budget for resurfacing footpaths in South Belfast. (AQW 6463/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads service has advised that its budgets for particular areas of work are not allocated on a Parliamentary Constituency or Council ward basis.

However, I have been advised by Roads Service that in the 2008/09 financial year, the budget for footway reconstruction and resurfacing in the Belfast South Section Office area was £352,000. Belfast South Section Office's area of responsibility covers parts of East, South and West Belfast.

The budget allocations for the 2009/10 financial year are presently being finalised, and it is anticipated that the financial allocation for this function will be similar.

### Resurfacing Footpaths

**Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Regional Development what (i) remedial repairs have been carried out; and (ii) resurfacing undertaken, on footpaths in South Belfast; and to detail the cost of the work. (AQW 6466/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has a statutory duty to maintain the public footways in a safe and serviceable condition. Roads Service operates a system of regular safety inspections to ensure that essential response maintenance is identified and completed, as necessary.

It should be noted that budgets for particular areas of work, are not allocated by my Department's Roads Service on a Parliamentary Constituency or Council ward basis.

However, I have been advised by Roads Service that, in 2008/09, footway repairs, comprising of over 2900m<sup>2</sup> of patching, 300m<sup>2</sup> of flagged footways repairs and 650m of replacement kerbs and drainage channels were carried out in the Belfast South Section Office area. Belfast South Section Office's area of responsibility covers parts of East, South and West Belfast. The patching budget for this work was £228,000.

In 2008/09, the footway resurfacing programme completed in the South Belfast Section Office area, included Deramore Park, Rosetta Park, Benmore Drive, Strathallen Park, Strathyre Park, Aberfoyle Park, Aberfoyle Gardens and Old Forge Manor, at a cost of £352,000.

### Double Yellow Lines at Junctions

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to double yellow lines extending around junctions, (i) what his Department's policy is; and (ii) what distance can they be. (AQW 6509/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member will be aware that double yellow lines indicate where you cannot wait in a vehicle at any time during the day. They are used to signify where a waiting restriction/prohibition is in force.

The extent of double yellow lines at junctions will depend on the length/nature of the restriction/prohibition in force, considered necessary at a particular location.

### Road Safety on the A26 Dual Carriageway

**Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development what his Department's plans are to improve road safety on the A26 dual carriageway from Dunsilly to Ballee roundabouts. (AQW 6539/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service, in conjunction with the PSNI, monitors the safety performance of all roads across the North.

Roads Service has advised that the A26 Lisnevenagh dual carriageway, between Dunsilly and Ballee, was constructed to a high standard, in line with the standards applicable at the time. An analysis of the collision history, carried out in December 2008, concluded that it was not possible to establish a common pattern that could be addressed by road safety engineering measures.

Street lighting has been provided at two of the busiest junctions along the A26, to address night time collision problems that were identified. In addition, Roads Service has also recently erected a number of new junction warning signs at the busier junctions along the A26. New 'School' warning signs have also been provided on the approaches to the Valley Road junction for Carnaghts Primary School.

Although Roads Service has recently agreed to monitor traffic speeds in the vicinity of the Carnaghts Primary School, there are no plans to introduce any further measures on the A26 Lisnevenagh dual carriageway, at present. However, Roads Service will continue to monitor the road safety of the route in conjunction with the PSNI.

### Road Safety on the A26 Dual Carriageway

**Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in view of the large number of accidents, if he will consider implementing a 50 mph speed limit from Woodgreen Junction to Cronkill Junction. (AQW 6540/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that the A26 Lisnevenagh Road dual carriageway, between Dunsilly and Ballee, including the stretch of road from Woodgreen to Cromkill, is subject to the national speed limit of 70 mph.

Although Roads Service has recently agreed to monitor traffic speeds in the vicinity of the Carnaghts Primary School, there are no current proposals to reduce the speed limit on any section of this road.

### Park and Ride Facilities

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to increase park and ride facilities in (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) North Down. (AQW 6542/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department aims to encourage people to consider using more sustainable forms of travel. With this aim in mind, Roads Service's Divisions, in association with Translink, who provide the formal bus service, are implementing a number of additional Park and Ride facilities across the North:-

- **Northern Division** are progressing two additional schemes in Dungiven and Drumahoe, having already extended the existing facility at Ballee in Ballymena, and are looking at further sites on the proposed new realignment of the A6.
- **Southern Division** are currently progressing several schemes in the Armagh City area.
- **Western Division** are intending to provide schemes at:-
  - A5 Ballygawley Roundabout, at the junction between A5 and A4;
  - Crevenagh Road, Omagh - trial park and ride, using the existing Park and Share facility.
  - Wellington Road, Enniskillen - provide park and ride spaces in a free car park, adjacent to the existing bus station in Enniskillen; and
  - Park and Share facilities are also planned at Stangmore and Tamnamore roundabouts on the M1. While these are initially planned as park and share, they have been planned with Park and Ride in mind should the demand be appropriate.
- **Eastern Division** - Within the Belfast Metropolitan Area the plans for introducing park and ride facilities are contained in the Belfast Metropolitan Transportation Plan (2015). There are proposals for local park and ride sites, using bus-based services for each of the six main transport corridors into Belfast, totalling 4000 spaces for the greater Belfast area, by 2015. In North Down specifically, the Plan proposes a new bus-based park and ride facility with 400 spaces at Tillysburn, adjacent to the A2/A55 junction, to provide a further public transport option for travel to Belfast from the North Down area.

Park and Ride facilities at NIR stations and halts across the North are planned to increase by 1,811 spaces between 2009 and 2015. These plans are subject to agreement of Translink's Corporate and Business Plan, which takes account of the availability of funding over the remainder of the budget period. The figure quoted includes an increase of 143 spaces on the Bangor Line in North Down between 2011 and 2015.

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 6268/09, to provide a breakdown of (i) how NI Water will spend £667 million; (ii) the services provided; (iii) the companies involved; and (iv) how much they will be paid. (AQW 6543/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it spent £424 million on capital works projects between 1 April 2007 and the end of February 2009 and plans to invest a further £243 million to the end of 2009/10, subject to the completion of statutory and other processes. This spend can be broken down into four main asset categories as detailed in the table below.

Asset Category	Apr 07 To Feb 09 (£Million)	Mar 09 To Mar 10 (£Million)
Water distribution system	96	56
Water treatment works	25	29
Wastewater network	144	51
Wastewater treatment works	159	107

This major investment is aimed at improving the water and sewerage infrastructure to achieve compliance with European Union water quality and environmental standards and will provide maximum benefit for customers including enhanced drinking water quality, improved delivery of services, greater protection of the environment and public health.

The list below shows the companies employed on capital works projects since 1 April 2007. The value of individual contracts is deemed to be commercially sensitive information which NIW is unable to release.

Company Name	Company Name
Aquatech Publications	Southern Health & Social Care Trust
Benny O'Neill Contracts	T. D. McKane & Son
Biwater Graham	T. G. Eakin
Black & Veatch	T. O Connell & Sons
Bradley and Co.	Tes NI Ltd
BSG Civil Engineering Ltd	Time and Data Systems International Ltd
Campbell Contracts	W. J. McLaughlin
Campbell Quinn JV Ltd	W. O Kane
Charles Brand - Holleran JV	Ward Contracts
Charles Brand Ltd	Waste Water Controls LTD
Cityside development Ltd.	William Doherty Construction
Conwell Contracts Ltd	William Dowling Ltd
COPA Ltd	Williams Industrial Services
Copa Meica	WIS/Gillen JV
COPA WASTE WATER CONTROLS	AJ McCann Consultants Ltd
Dawson WAM Ltd	Aquatech Publications
Deane Public Works	Atkins Power
Earney Contracts Ltd	BDO Stoy Hayward
Earth Tech Engineering Ltd	Biwater Graham JV
Electrical and Pump Services LTD	Biwater Ltd
Engineering Services (Terence McGeary)	Black & Veatch
Enterprise/Farrans	BSG Civil Engineering Ltd
EPS Environmental Ltd	Building Design Partnership Ltd
ETECH/Farrans	Bullen Consultants
Euro Services (NI)	Capita Symonds Ltd
Farrans	Chandler KBS
Farrans Construction Ltd	Construction Consultancy Services
FM Environmental Ltd	Construction Supervisory Services Ltd
Fox Contracts	Contract Audit Line

Company Name	Company Name
GEDA Construction Co LTD	Dawson WAM Ltd
Gerard Ward	Doran Consulting
GF Loughran	EC Harris (Ireland) Ltd
Glen Construction	Entec UK Limited
Glen Contracts	ETEL/Farrans
Graham Construction	Ewan Associates Ltd
Graham Structural Repairs	Faber Maunsell Ltd
GRAHAM Hyder	Ferguson McIlveen
Indepth Surveys	GEDA Construction Co LTD
James Oliver Hearty & Son	Glover Site Investigations
JJ MCCROSSAN	Halcrow Faber Maunsell
John Graham (Dromore) Ltd	Halcrow RPM
John Rainey and Company	Halcrow RPM Mulholland & Doherty JV
L McGuckin	Hyder Consulting Ltd
Lagan Construction Ltd	Intra Consulting Ltd
Lowry Bros Ltd	Jacobs Babbie
Maker Freyssinet	JCP Consultanting
Makers UK LTD	Jet PR
MCC Civil Engineering Ltd	John Graham (Dromore) Ltd
McFadden Ltd	McAdam Design
McNicholas Construction	McAuley & Browne
Milligan Bros Ltd	McNicholas Construction
Mills Contracts	MMC Associates
Morgan Farrans JV	MouchelParkman
Morrow Group	Mulholland & Doherty
Murphy Charles Brand Joint Venture	MWH - RPS Consulting Engineers JV
NIE Connect	Nicholas O Dwyer
OConnell - Mills JV	Northern Archaeological Consultancy
ONEILL Contracts	Purac Brand
P. Clarke & Sons Ltd	R Robinson and Sons
P. F. Murphy	Rivers Agency
Purac Brand	RPS Kirk McLure + Morton
Quinns Automation Ltd	Scott Wilson
Rivers Agency	Stratex
Rodgers Contracts Ltd	WDR & RT Taggart
Scott Electromech Ltd	White Young Green
Scotts Electrical Services	WJ McDowell & Partners
Shearwater Consortium	WS Atkins
SKE Solutions	

### Resurfacing Footpaths

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what the budget is for (i) repairing; and (ii) resurfacing footpaths in North Down. (AQW 6548/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that in the 2008/09 financial year, the North Down area had a budget of:-

- (i) £102,000 for carrying out repairs to the public footway network; and
- (ii) £150,000 for resurfacing the public footway network.

Although budget allocations for the 2009/10 financial year are not yet finalised, it is anticipated that the apportionment of expenditure in each function, is likely to be similar.

### Movilla Road, Newtownards

**Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the 30 mph speed limit on Movilla Road, Newtownards to beyond Abbey Primary School, considering the area's poor road safety record. (AQW 6607/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service considers the Movilla Road, Newtownards to have a reasonably good safety record and therefore, there are no proposals, at present, to extend the speed limit on this road.

### Belfast International Airport

**Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many passengers have used Belfast International Airport in each of the last ten years. (AQW 6619/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department does not maintain such statistics on a regular basis. Data on passenger numbers at airports are collected by the Civil Aviation Authority and published on its website. That source shows that the number of terminal and transit passengers using Belfast International Airport was as follows.

1999	3,035,907
2000	3,147,670
2001	3,618,671
2002	3,576,785
2003	3,976,703
2004	4,407,413
2005	4,824,271
2006	5,038,692
2007	5,272,864
2008	5,262,354

### Antrim Train Station

**Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many passengers have used Antrim train station in each of the last ten years. (AQW 6620/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Translink have informed me that passenger journey figures record each time a passenger either departs from the station or arrives at the station and have provided the following figures for Antrim train station:

2007/08	201,057
2006/07	159,144
2005/06	142,121
2004/05	126,718
2003/04	110,476
2002/03	93,089
2001/02	73,398
2000/01	80,234
1999/00	84,548
1998/99	101,656

### Northern Ireland Water

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) if Northern Ireland Water has plans to develop a new headquarters or other significant capital projects; (ii) if any geographical restrictions on preferences apply to these works; (iii) to provide an update on those plans. (AQW 6655/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it plans to lease accommodation for a new Head Office but to date no decision has yet been taken on the most appropriate location. There are no geographical restrictions or preferences for the site of a new Head Office. The decision will be based on sound business needs and best value for money. When NIW identifies a suitable location it will submit a Full Business Case to me for consideration.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many employees are in his Department in the Londonderry/Derry City Council area. (AQW 6669/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** At present, 74 of the Department for Regional Development's staff work at locations within the Londonderry/Derry City Council area.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many employees in his Department travel from Londonderry/Derry to work in Belfast. (AQW 6670/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The travel arrangements of individual members of staff are not recorded. There are, however, 5 staff within the Department for Regional Development who have home addresses within the Londonderry/Derry City Council area and who currently work at locations in Belfast.

### Improvement Works on A57

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to detail what action Roads Service is taking to restore the surface of the A57 between Templepatrick and the International Airport, and (ii) to list the improvement works which have been undertaken on this road, in each of the last five years. (AQW 6701/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has advised that a tender to carry out resurfacing works on the A57, from its junction with the north eastern end of the Old Ballyrobin Road, for a distance of 1.9 km towards the International Airport, will be advertised on 2 April 2009. Following the award of the successful tender, it is hoped that resurfacing works will be complete by early July 2009.

With regard to improvement works carried out on this stretch of road, I am further advised that there have been no other improvements undertaken within the last five years.

### Northern Ireland Railways

**Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development who is responsible for the provision of wheelchair access to the platform of Northern Ireland Railways halt at Bellarena. (AQW 6766/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Northern Ireland Railways are responsible for the provision of wheelchair access from the public footpath at Bellarena halt.

Work to bring the halt in line with the Disability and Discrimination Act (DDA) will be undertaken during the re-lay of the track between Coleraine and Derry, which is scheduled to commence in 2011.

### Removal of Emblems

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to remove emblems depicting Republican Sinn Fein on lamp standards. (AQW 6780/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service has signed up to the Multi Agency Protocol on the Display of Flags in Public Areas. The protocol indicates that the PSNI will take the lead where the display of flags or emblems is causing tension, or is having a detrimental affect on the quality of life in a community.

The PSNI would therefore be the appropriate lead agency to contact regarding this matter.

### A57 Improvement Works

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 6701/09, to detail any repairs or improvement works which have been carried out on the A57 between Templepatrick and the International Airport, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 6870/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In my response to your previous query, regarding the planned resurfacing works on the A57 (AQW 6701/09), I advised that there had been no other improvements undertaken on this road within the last five years.

My Department's Roads Service has further advised that it no longer holds records of works carried out, on this stretch of road, prior to the five year period, and is therefore unable to provide any details of the information requested.

## DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Projects Planned for North Down

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) projects; and (ii) amount of capital investment planned for the North Down constituency for (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11. (AQW 6265/09)

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie):** The available information on capital investment projects in my Department relevant to the Member's North Down constituency is set out below.

The Bangor Jobs & Benefits Office Project will see a combined welfare and employment service delivered to customers. The costs of the project – which will fall in the 2010-11 financial year, are not currently available as these will depend on whether front or back office processing is the option chosen for benefit delivery in the new Bangor Office. This decision will be made following the outcome of public consultation on the Social Security Agency's Strategic Business Review, expected in April/ May 2009.

The information on capital investment projects relating to housing is not yet available. The 5 year Social Housing Development programme (for newbuild housing) for 2009/10 onwards has not yet been approved and published. Similarly, the Housing Executive's budget for capital improvement works for housing for 2009/10 is not yet finalised. Once approved, the Social Housing Development Programme will be published on the Housing Executive's website. However, it should be noted that, for reasons of commercial sensitivity the Housing Executive does not release individual scheme values with regard to the Programme.

### Social Housing

**Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the progress of the social housing provision at the Skeoge lands in Londonderry/Derry. (AQW 6272/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Fold Housing Association has submitted detailed plans to develop social housing at the Skeoge lands in Derry.

This scheme has not yet been approved as there are some outstanding EU Procurement issues that need to be resolved. Legal advice has been sought and a decision will be made following consideration of that advice.

I am determined to meet the increasing housing demand in Derry and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive who manage the Social Housing Development Programme on my behalf have already identified a number of new sites and opportunities that will ensure Derry gets its full allocation of new homes irrespective of the application for Skeoge which is still under consideration.

### Housing Executive

**Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are on the waiting list for Housing Executive homes in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Craigavon; (iii) Portadown; and (iv) Banbridge. (AQW 6301/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The following table details the number of applicants on the waiting list for Housing Executive homes in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Craigavon; (iii) Portadown; and (iv) Banbridge, at December 2008.

	Applicants
Lurgan	881
Craigavon	254
Portadown	738
Banbridge	430

### Housing Officers

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development how many complaints have been received by the housing officers in Newtownards, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 6367/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Informal complaints can be regularly received and resolved quickly without the requirement to process them through the formal complaints system. Formal complaints dealt with by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's District Office at Newtownards are as follows:-

February 2006 – February 2007	21
February 2007 – February 2008	40
February 2008 – February 2009	28

## Housing Executive

**Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the status of the contract between Red Sky and the Housing Executive's West Belfast district; and to outline any issues that have arisen. (AQW 6377/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Red Sky currently has a maintenance contract with the Housing Executive for the West Belfast area. The Assembly's Public Accounts Committee Office received a letter from the West Belfast Housing Community Network complaining about the lack of cleaning services provided by Red Sky at several flat complexes in the Housing Executive's Belfast District's 1 and 3 estates.

Because of the 'whistleblower' nature of this letter the Public Accounts Office referred the letter to the Northern Ireland Audit Office for investigation. The Housing Executive had commissioned Cooke & Kettyle, a local consultancy firm, to inspect a sample of communal halls and galleries of various flat complexes within the Housing Executive District of West Belfast.

The consultants assessed whether the periodic cleaning schedule was in fact being complied with and whether any work was carried out in accordance with the specification set out in the contract with Red Sky. A number of concerns are raised in the Consultants report which I intend to see are fully dealt with. However, as the Northern Ireland Audit Office is investigating this matter I am unwilling to comment further until I receive their report.

## Neighbourhood Renewal

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development how many economic projects have been funded under neighbourhood renewal in North Down, in each of the last three years. (AQW 6384/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Whilst no specific economic projects have been funded under neighbourhood renewal in North Down during this period, funding has been provided for two projects which include an element aimed at improving employment opportunities in the Kilcooley area.

## Housing Executive

**Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development what is the current average length of time for repairs to be carried out to Housing Executive properties from the time the problem is reported. (AQW 6387/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** All repairs reported to the Housing Executive are prioritised into emergency, urgent or routine repair categories in accordance with the current tenancy agreement.

During the period April 2008 to February 2009 repairs were completed from the time the problem was reported as follows:

- 98.5% of all emergency repairs within 24 hours
- 94.25% of all urgent repairs within 4 days
- 80% of all routine repairs within 4 weeks

## Autism Initiatives

**Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the availability of floating services by Autism Initiatives. (AQO 2424/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Autism Initiatives Northern Ireland is an accredited Supporting People provider funded through the Supporting People programme to deliver housing support services. The Supporting People programme provides funding for 9 accommodation based schemes and 2 floating support services.

The total annual contract value for these services for 08/09 is £740,000. The accommodation based services are located in Antrim, Armagh, Bangor, Belfast, Castlereagh, Downpatrick, and Lisburn. Supporting People funds over 50 providers to provide over 75 floating support services across Northern Ireland.

Autism Initiatives are one of these and the operating scope of their two floating support services is the Northern Trust area and former South and East Belfast Trust (now Belfast Trust) area. Whilst the Supporting People budget has been baselined the Area Supporting People Partnerships continue to prioritise proposals for developing new and expanding existing services for this client group.

### Benefit Overpayments

**Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail for each of the past 10 years (i) the total number of benefit overpayments; (ii) the total sum of benefit overpayments; (iii) the type of benefits where overpayments were paid to deceased persons; and (iv) the total amount that has been successfully reclaimed from overpayments made. (AQW 6406/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information relating to social security benefits is only available from November 2006.

The table below sets out the number and sum of social security benefit overpayments paid to deceased persons and the amount successfully reclaimed during the period November 2006 to 20 March 2009. The type of social security benefits where overpayments were paid to deceased persons includes Income Support, State Pension, State Pension Credit, Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit.

Period	Total number of overpayments	Total sum of overpayments	Total amount reclaimed
November 2006 to March 2007	2,590	£905,890	£371
April 2007 to March 2008	8,528	£2,106,607	£276,416
April 2008 to 20 March 2009	20,047	£3,455,471	£1,072,405

While some overpayments of Housing Benefit to deceased persons would undoubtedly have been made over the period in question, these are not separately categorised and therefore the Housing Executive is not able to provide the information requested. Recovery of such overpayments would normally be sought from the estate of the deceased person.

### Private Landlords

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Social Development if she has any plans to bring forward new legislation to give more protection for private landlords. (AQW 6427/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I will shortly be launching a consultation document on a Strategy for the Private Rented Sector in Northern Ireland. The proposals in this strategy will reflect the outcomes of an evaluation of the 2006 Private Tenancies Order which currently governs the operation of the private rented sector including landlord and tenant obligations. Proposals reflecting the need for any new or amending legislation emerging from the strategy will be brought before the Assembly during 2010.

### Housing Executive

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties in the East Antrim constituency are currently awaiting maintenance work, and how long on average they have been waiting. (AQW 6429/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The information requested is not available by Parliamentary Constituency, nor is it available in the format requested. The Housing Executive's Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey 2 District Offices include the areas which comprise the East Antrim constituency areas.

At 27 March 2009:

- Carrickfergus District Office had 158 routine repairs outstanding, with an average waiting time of 8 weeks.
- Larne District Office had 83 routine repairs outstanding, with an average waiting time of 8 weeks.
- Newtownabbey 2 District Office had 139 routine repairs outstanding, with an average waiting time of 8 weeks.

### Housing Executive

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Social Development how many vacant Housing Executive properties there are currently in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey. (AQW 6430/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The number of vacant properties within the administrative areas covered by the Housing Executive's Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey 1 and 2 District Offices are as follows:-

Larne	118
Carrickfergus	57
Newtownabbey	242

### Housing Executive

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development would she consider changing the criteria for heating in extensions in homes of people with disabilities to ensure that sufficient radiators are put into bedrooms. (AQW 6486/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Housing Executive's current heating policy makes appropriate provision for a radiator within each bedroom of a property of an appropriate size to adequately heat the room. Where an extension has been provided for a person with a disability, the Housing Executive will ensure that the property complies with this standard.

### Charities

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how the new legislation will protect legitimate charities; and (ii) what action will be taken against non-legitimate charities. (AQW 6515/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The main aims of the Charities Act (NI) 2008 are to protect and support local charities, encourage good governance arrangements and provide greater public confidence in charitable giving. All charities will be required to register with the new Charity Commission and submit annual returns on their activities and financial performance. This information will be open to public scrutiny and will allow charities to be more accountable and to demonstrate their public benefit.

Whilst there is limited evidence of fraudulent charities operating in Northern Ireland, the Act provides the Commission with wide ranging powers to identify and investigate apparent misconduct or mismanagement in the administration of charities and to take remedial or protective action. It will liaise closely with the PSNI, HM Revenue and Customs and other charity regulators in the UK and Ireland to ensure that information is shared and action taken where appropriate.

### Charities

**Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Social Development in relation to charities legislation, whether trustees and committee members of charities will be required to declare an interest if they are to gain financially from fund raising activities, and to clarify the sanctions for not declaring such interests. (AQW 6517/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Part 9 of the Charities Act (NI) 2008 contains provisions relating to charity trustees. This includes regulations on the remuneration of trustees providing services to a charity. The new Charity Commission for Northern Ireland will be required to issue detailed advice and guidance to charities on this issue. This is likely to follow best practice adopted by other charity regulators in the UK which only permits such payments in limited circumstances where the service is required by a charity in pursuit of its charitable purposes, where it is in the charity's best interests and where there is a written agreement between the charity and the trustee.

Part 13 of the Act contains provisions relating to the control of fundraising and public collections. This details the circumstances in which an officer, employee or trustee of a charity can engage in fundraising activity and

includes a requirement to produce a written statement if any remuneration is to be received in connection with such activity.

The Charity Commission will have wide ranging powers to investigate any evidence of non compliance with the regulations. These include powers to suspend or remove a charity trustee where the Commission is satisfied that there has been misconduct or mismanagement in the administration of a charity.

### Warm Homes Scheme

**Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to bring eligibility for financial assistance for insulation through the Warm Homes Scheme, in line with other parts of the UK, by giving assistance to people over the age of 70 regardless of their financial circumstance. (AQW 6538/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Warm Homes Scheme is broadly similar to the Warm Front Scheme in England but it takes account of the unique circumstances which face householders in Northern Ireland. The free insulation project operating in others parts of the UK is funded through Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT). CERT funding is not available in Northern Ireland and cannot be replicated here. It is my intention to use all available resources to fund the Warm Homes Scheme which will target those people in greatest need with help to insulate and heat their homes.

### Neighbourhood Renewal

**Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Social Development how many economic projects have been funded under Neighbourhood Renewal in East Antrim, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 6599/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Part of Rathcoole estate in East Antrim falls within a Neighbourhood Renewal Area. Funding of £12,820 was provided to the area in 2006/07, £32,220 in 2007/08 and £39,695 in 2008/09 for two economic projects.

### Carer's Allowance

**Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many people received Carer's Allowance, per constituency, in each of the last 3 years; and (ii) if she can provide statistics on the number of family members who provide care without pay. (AQW 6660/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The table below sets out the information requested for part (i). The number shown reflects the number of customers where an amount of Carer's Allowance is in payment. Information is not available for part (ii) as my Department does not collect or hold statistics on the number of family members who provide care without pay.

Parliamentary Constituency	Carer's Allowance Recipients at February 2007	Carer's Allowance Recipients at February 2008	Carer's Allowance Recipients at February 2009
Belfast East	1,209	1,177	1,166
Belfast North	2,110	2,139	2,194
Belfast South	1,012	994	1,043
Belfast West	3,302	3,241	3,251
East Antrim	1,043	1,044	1,055
East Londonderry	1,520	1,522	1,571
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	1,594	1,525	1,611
Foyle	2,732	2,720	2,769
Lagan Valley	1,265	1,264	1,309
Mid Ulster	1,932	1,883	1,945

Parliamentary Constituency	Carer's Allowance Recipients at February 2007	Carer's Allowance Recipients at February 2008	Carer's Allowance Recipients at February 2009
Newry and Armagh	2,329	2,298	2,315
North Antrim	1,460	1,464	1,517
North Down	874	863	864
South Antrim	1,215	1,221	1,238
South Down	1,948	1,917	2,024
Strangford	1,338	1,307	1,343
Upper Bann	1,981	1,976	2,050
West Tyrone	2,051	1,992	2,077
Unallocated Postcode*	202	260	260
Total	31,117	30,807	31,602

\* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Social Development how many employees are in her Department in the Londonderry/Derry City Council area. (AQW 6671/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** In the Department for Social Development there are 815 employees in the Londonderry/Derry City Council area.

### Departmental Staff

**Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Social Development how many employees in her Department travel from Londonderry/Derry to work in Belfast. (AQW 6672/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** There are 65 employees in Department for Social Development who have addresses in Londonderry/Derry and work in Belfast.

### Departmental Budget

**Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development when she plans to reveal her Department's budget for the next financial year, for the North Down area. (AQW 6696/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The initial budget allocations for the 3 years 2008-09 to 2010-11 for all Departments – including Social Development, were revealed in the Budget 2008-11 document, published by the Executive in January 2008.

The overall allocation for my Department, at £754.4m in total, covers the whole of Northern Ireland and is not broken down on a Constituency basis. In addition, the Department's Annually Managed Expenditure budget for 2009-10 – covering mostly social security benefit expenditure and the financial assistance scheme, amounts to some £4.86 billion.

### Social Housing/Homelessness

**Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact that the current waiting lists for social housing will have on homelessness this year. (AQO 2451/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Waiting lists and homelessness are clearly connected, but they are also impacted by a range of other factors.

Homelessness applications rose between 2003/04 and 2006/07 before falling in 2007/08. Current indications are that a further decrease in homelessness applications will follow in 2008/09. The number of applications on the Social Housing Waiting List has increased year on year between 2003/04 and 2008/09.

Demography is the key driver in terms of housing need and has a direct effect on both the profile and size of the waiting list. Between 2006 and 2021 there is a projected 10% growth in the population with a consequent growth in household formation of 19% over the same period. The population profile is also aging and when this is combined with the move towards Independent Living the pressure on future housing requirements is clear to see.

### **Citizens Advice: Funding**

**Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development whether she will consider increasing funding to Citizens Advice Bureaux to assist those affected by the economic downturn. (AQO 2452/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** My Department already provides significant support to the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) for the valuable service they provide and to others who provide much needed advice services and I am happy to continue to do so.

My Department directly core funds voluntary advice services up to £1.5 million per annum through the Regional Infrastructure Programme. For the 2009/10 year Citizens Advice Regional Office will be able to claim up to £665k, Advice NI £246k and the Law Centre £680k.

My Department's contribution towards the provision of local voluntary advice services for 2009/10 totals £1.9m through the Community Support Programme. This funding is matched by local councils who contribute a further £1.9m. Local Citizens Advice Bureaux and other local voluntary advice providers can apply to councils for financial support.

Furthermore subject to appraisal, Neighbourhood Renewal in the North West will provide £124k to the Derry CAB.

In January I also announced plans to recruit 150 new staff to the Social Security Agency frontline. This is a proactive response to the current difficult economic situation.

In addition Citizen's Advice has been involved in the delivery of the Social Security Agency's Benefit Uptake Programme since 2006. Up to 31 March 2008, this has generated an additional £15 million in benefit. To date £554k has been paid to Citizen's Advice Regional Headquarters with further payments likely to be made in May 2009.

Through the Regional Infrastructure Programme the Housing Rights Service will receive £672k core funding. Additionally from April 2009 I hope to provide approximately £100k to increase the level of advice for people who are experiencing difficulty making mortgage payments.

### **Secretary of State for Work and Pensions: Discussions**

**Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Social Development what recent discussions she has held with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. (AQO 2453/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I met with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, James Purnell, in November 2008. We discussed a range of issues relevant to our responsibilities for social security, child support and pensions including welfare reform and the reform of the social fund. I pressed Mr Purnell on a number of issues including the eligibility for winter fuel payments, greater assistance for carers and the availability of disability living allowance, in particular, for the sight impaired. On that last issue, I am pleased to say that Mr Purnell has subsequently accepted an amendment to the Welfare Reform Bill currently before Parliament which will allow those with a severe sight impairment to have access to the higher rate mobility component. Subject to Executive approval, I intend to bring corresponding legislation before the Assembly.

We agreed to meet on a regular basis and a further meeting is currently being arranged.

### Red Sky

**Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Social Development how the Housing Executive monitors the progress of work carried out on its behalf by Red Sky. (AQO 2454/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I understand, that Red Sky has a maintenance contract with the Housing Executive for the West Belfast area. This Assembly's Public Accounts Committee Office received a letter from the West Belfast Housing Community Network complaining about the lack of cleaning services provided by the contractor, Red Sky, at several flat complexes in the Housing Executive's Belfast District's 1 and 3 estates. Because of the 'whistleblower' content of this letter the Public Accounts Office referred the letter to the Northern Ireland Audit Office for investigation. The Housing Executive has commissioned Cooke & Kettle, a local consultancy firm, to inspect a sample of communal halls and galleries of various flat complexes within the NIHE District of West Belfast. The consultants assessed whether the periodic cleaning schedule was in fact being complied with and whether any work was carried out in accordance with the specification set out in the contract with Red Sky. A number of concerns are raised in the Consultants report which I intend to see are fully dealt with. However, as the Northern Ireland Audit Office is investigating this matter I am unwilling to comment much further until I receive their report.

### Budgetary Position

**Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on her Department's budgetary position. (AQO 2455/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** My Department's budgetary position for 2008-09 can be summarised as follows:

The Final Plan Departmental Expenditure Limits for Social Security and Urban Regeneration/Community Development are £224.5m and £101.8m respectively and it is expected that overall spending will be within budget and acceptable tolerance levels at the year end.

The lack of capital receipts throughout the year due to the economic downturn, has impacted on the overall financial provision available for Housing and unmet bids of £30.6m at February monitoring typifies the difficulty of the situation. As a result, spending on both capital and revenue Housing programmes has had to be curtailed in order to live within the net overall £432.4m available.

The Department's overall Final Plan budget of £758.7m, includes the initial £15m recently allocated by the Executive to fund Fuel Poverty payments. The opening allocation for next year is some £4m less than this at £754.4m, illustrating that 2009-10 is likely to be another difficult year for funding. However, as always my priority will be to protect the most vulnerable in our society, in particular through the key social security and housing programmes.

### Co-Ownership: East Londonderry

**Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the number of co-ownership applications in East Londonderry in the last year; and how many were successful. (AQO 2456/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Co-Ownership Housing has advised me that it records statistics according to local council area, rather than by parliamentary constituency. During the fiscal year 2008/09, a total of fourteen applications were received by people seeking to purchase a home in the Limavady and Coleraine Borough Council areas, which form the East Derry/Londonderry constituency. Of these, five were successful, six have still to be decided and three were unsuccessful.

### Off-the-Shelf Houses

**Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Social Development how many off-the-shelf houses the Department has purchased from developers since May 2007. (AQO 2457/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** In the 2007/08 programme year, 270 Off-the-Shelf units of accommodation were purchased. During the period 1 April 2008 to 19 March 2009, 214 Off-the-Shelf units of accommodation have been purchased.

### Housing Budget: Shortfall

**Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development for an assessment of how the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget will impact on spending programmes. (AQO 2458/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The £100m shortfall in the housing budget will lead to reduced expenditure on a range of capital works across the housing programme. Available funding will have to be directed to priority programmes and to where commitments already exist. It is also a priority to protect the vulnerable.

I will continue to make bids for additional funding in future monitoring rounds in 2009/10.

### Neighbourhood Renewal

**Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development when the next inter Departmental meeting in relation to neighbourhood renewal will take place. (AQO 2459/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The next meeting of the inter-departmental Ministerial Group on Neighbourhood Renewal will be on the 13th of May 2009.

### Social Mobility

**Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has held with the Minister of Education in relation to social mobility. (AQO 2460/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have held no specific discussions with the Minister of Education in relation to social mobility.

### Shared Future

**Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of how society is moving towards a shared future particularly in housing. (AQO 2461/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** When I launched the New Housing Agenda in February 2008 I made a Shared Future a central theme. A twin track approach has been adopted to developing and supporting shared neighbourhoods through the Social Housing Development Programme and in existing housing areas. The most recent published Northern Ireland Life & Times survey (2007) found that 80% of people in Northern Ireland would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood. The sad events of recent weeks have also clearly demonstrated that the people of Northern Ireland want to leave behind the baggage of the past and build a new future together. I am, therefore, more convinced than ever that Northern Ireland society wants, and is relentlessly moving towards, a Shared Future where diversity is welcomed and embraced.

### ‘Shared’ Housing Developments

**Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the conversion of current locations to ‘Shared Housing’ developments. (AQO 2462/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Shared Neighbourhood Programme adopts a community based approach to supporting local communities to designate existing social housing areas as Shared Neighbourhoods. The Programme is designed to build on existing relationships and structures within current housing areas and to develop a good relations plan and neighbourhood charter that offers the opportunity for people to live in a shared neighbourhood where diversity is welcomed. A total of 30 neighbourhoods will be identified over the pilot three

year period, through a selection process and community consultation, to participate in the Shared Neighbourhood Programme. In conjunction with the International Fund for Ireland, I launched the first five estates in August 2008 with details of the next ten neighbourhoods to be announced over the coming year.

### Alcohol Legislation

**Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons for not bringing legislation forward to ensure that off-sales display their shop names on carrier bags and what action she is taking to reduce under-age drinking. (AQO 2463/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** In the South of Ireland, where legislative provision to brand containers for drinks for consumption off licensed premises was introduced in 2003 but never used, experience demonstrated that seeking to compel retailers to adopt this approach raises difficult issues to do with European human rights and competition rules. There are also major issues around rules of evidence in courts.

In my Statement to the Assembly on 17 November 2008 I set out my plans for a 2-stage programme of legislative reform which will include a number of measures aimed at reducing underage drinking. I am committed to working with Executive colleagues to ensure that liquor licensing legislation contributes positively to combating the harm caused to our young people by alcohol abuse.

### Social Housing

**Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the social and economic benefits that flow from accelerated investment in social housing provision. (AQO 2464/09)

**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.

### Construction Industry

**Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to support the construction industry and to confirm whether any new housing developments will be tendered to local firms. (AQO 2465/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** On 27 November 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. The Construction industry which has suffered so much in recent months would obviously have benefitted heavily from this increased investment.

Unfortunately the Executive was not able to support my proposals at that time but I remain convinced that this increased investment would help stimulate the economy, boost the construction industry as well of course as helping those in housing need and I will continue to make this case.

I will continue to seek support from my Executive colleagues for such proposals.

In respect of restricting new developments for local firms, it is not possible or legal to guarantee work for local developers or contractors in this manner. I would of course encourage as many local firms to bid for this work as possible, particularly given the real problems I know many are facing in these challenging times.

## NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

### Assembly IT System

**Mr D Bradley** asked the Assembly Commission why the Assembly IT system cannot receive e-mails from all e-mail providers; and what action is being taken to remedy this situation. (AQW 6282/09)

**The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):** The Assembly Commission provides a centrally managed e-mail system for use by Members and Secretariat staff, on Assembly business. The system is designed to accept all correctly addressed e-mail, from whatever source and deliver it directly to the recipient. Industry standard security systems examine all incoming e-mails for any signs of malicious threats and procedures are in place within the IS Office to deal with any quarantined e-mail or any incorrectly addressed e-mail with the minimum delay.

There have been instances when Members and Secretariat staff have reported that e-mail they were expecting had not arrived. However upon investigation there was no record of either the message reaching the NI Assembly systems or of any message being rejected outright. As the originating systems were outside the direct control of the Commission it was not possible to determine the exact cause of the problem. The IS Office will continue to monitor the NI Assembly e-mail system for any problems.

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